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ANC

JANUARY-FEBRUARY, 1954

35¢

The Dwarf by

RAY BRADBURY

UNUSUAL FANTASY FICTION

WALTER MILLER, JR.
WILLIAM P. McGIVERN
ALGIS BUDRYS
WALLACE WEST

A STARTLING PORTFOLIO *by Ernest Schroeder*

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ERNEST SCHROEDER

a portfolio

The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner is not only classic poetry, but it also contains the components of classic drama. Thus, Coleridge's masterpiece lends itself well to an artistic treatment. We feel that Schroeder's selection of incident was extremely good. And we are sure you will agree that his art work is outstanding. The portfolio is continued on page 70.

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ACCORDING TO YOU...

A FEW days ago a man walked into our office and said, "Don't you people ever answer your mail?" Sure, we said, why was he asking? He told us — and in the telling came out the idea for a regular column to be called "According To You . . ."

It seems our visitor had started to read FANTASTIC shortly after we changed over to digest size. Generally speaking, he liked the stories and illustrations, but regarded the covers as being much too sensational. He wrote in and said so, asking if they *had* to be that way. He failed to receive a formal answer, but since the cover format was changed soon afterward, he regarded *that* as our way of replying. But when we neglected to do anything about his second letter, he came in to inquire about our mail-answering habits.

We talked it over and he left, but the problem remained. What was the best way to handle it? A regular "Letters to the Editor" department? Readers who wanted a magazine filled with fiction weren't going to be happy at "losing" four or five pages. But it wouldn't do to ignore the customers who had something to say and who wanted to say it where others could hear.

This page represents a compromise. Each issue it will be filled with *excerpts* from letters we receive. Names and addresses will be included. Naturally there will not be enough space to quote from *all* letters; but those containing questions and comments of general interest will be drawn from as space permits.

For example: **Richard Keller,** 368 Mt. Prospect, Newark, N. J., writes: ". . . the humor in "Never Mind a Martian," by William P. McGivern, was badly outdated and no longer humor. P. G. Wodehouse did it far better twenty years ago . . ." In the opinion of the editors, reader Keller wouldn't know humor if it bit him in the leg. We laughed all the way through it, and any time an author can get a laugh out of us he's second only to Ring Lardner.

And that's how columns are born. We repeat: as many letters as space allows will be quoted here. If we don't agree with you we'll say so; if you don't agree with us, *you* say so. Fair enough?

— HB

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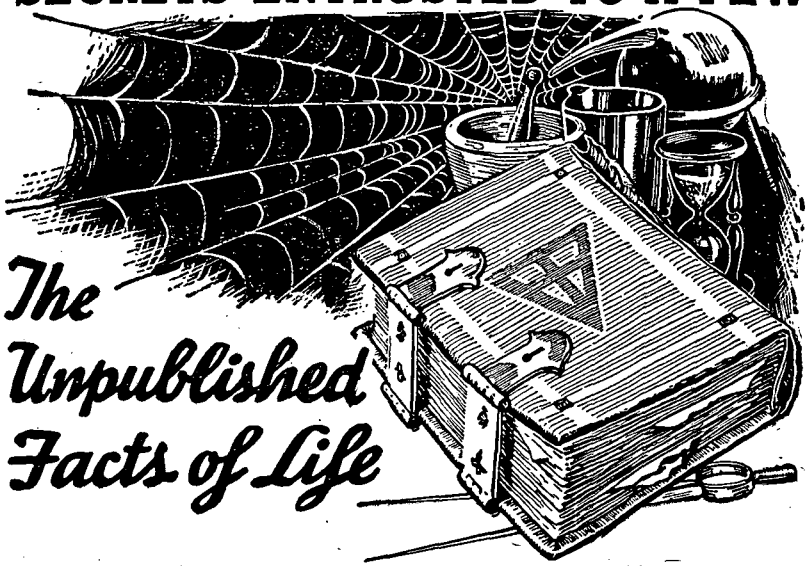
SECRETS ENTRUSTED TO A FEW



The Unpublished Facts of Life

THERE ARE some things that can not be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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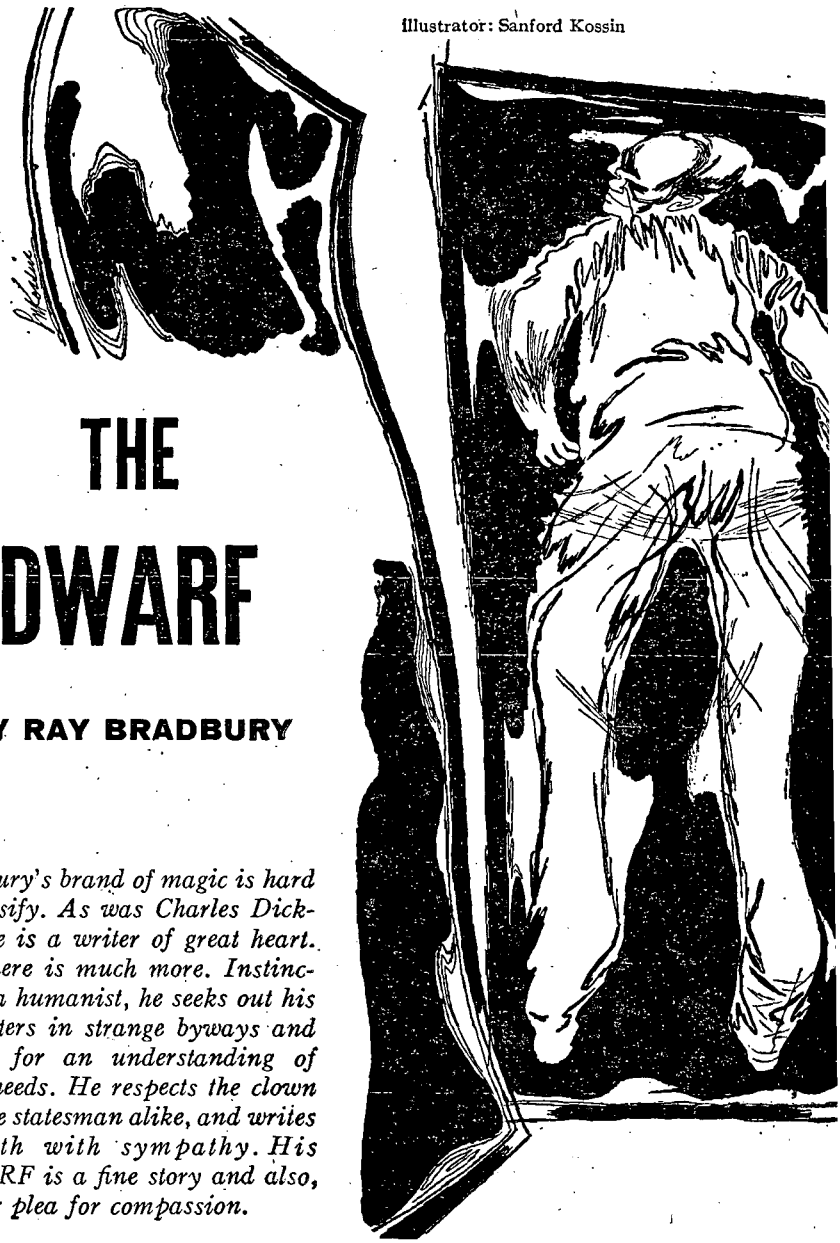
Illustrator: Sanford Kossin



THE DWARF

BY RAY BRADBURY

Bradbury's brand of magic is hard to classify. As was Charles Dickens, he is a writer of great heart. But there is much more. Instinctively a humanist, he seeks out his characters in strange byways and strives for an understanding of their needs. He respects the clown and the statesman alike, and writes of both with sympathy. His DWARF is a fine story and also, a clear plea for compassion.

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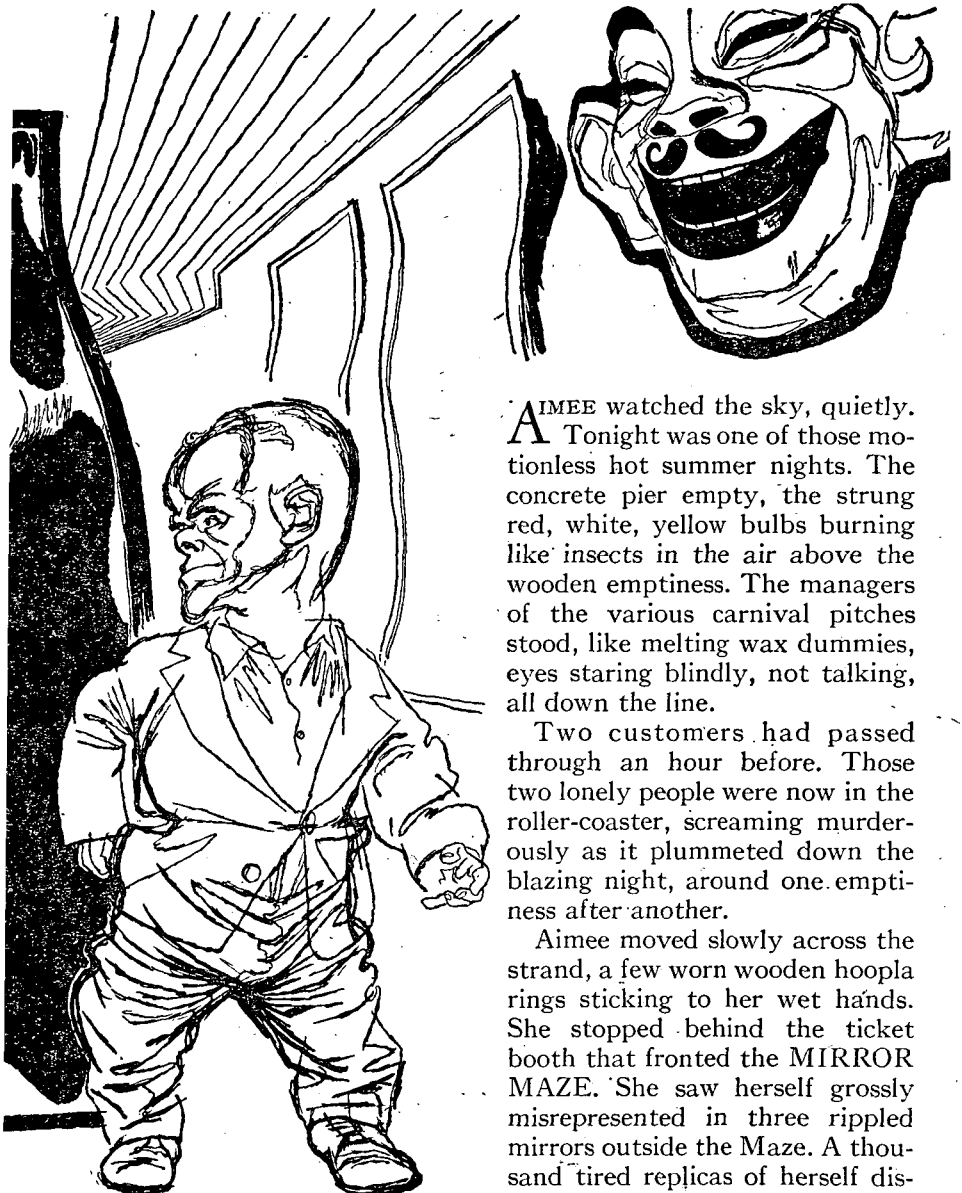

AIMEE watched the sky, quietly. Tonight was one of those motionless hot summer nights. The concrete pier empty, the strung red, white, yellow bulbs burning like insects in the air above the wooden emptiness. The managers of the various carnival pitches stood, like melting wax dummies, eyes staring blindly, not talking, all down the line.

Two customers had passed through an hour before. Those two lonely people were now in the roller-coaster, screaming murderously as it plummeted down the blazing night, around one emptiness after another.

Aimee moved slowly across the strand, a few worn wooden hoopla rings sticking to her wet hands. She stopped behind the ticket booth that fronted the MIRROR MAZE. She saw herself grossly misrepresented in three rippled mirrors outside the Maze. A thousand tired replicas of herself dissolved in the corridor beyond, hot

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images among so much clear coolness.

She stepped inside the ticket booth and stood looking a long while at Ralph Banghart's thin neck. He clenched an unlit cigar between his long uneven yellow teeth as he laid out a battered game of solitaire on the ticket shelf.

When the roller-coaster wailed and fell in its terrible avalanche again, she was reminded to speak.

"What kind of people go up in roller-coasters?"

Ralph Banghart worked his cigar a full thirty seconds. "People wanna die. That rollie-coaster's the handiest thing to dying there is." He sat listening to the faint sound of rifle shots from the shooting gallery. "This whole damn carny business's crazy. For instance, that Dwarf. You *seen* him? Every night, pays his dime, runs in the Mirror Maze all the way back through to Screwy Louie's Room. You should *see* this little runt head back there. My God!"

"Oh, yes," said Aimee, remembering. "I always wonder what it's like to be a dwarf. I always feel sorry when I see him."

"I could play him like an accordion."

"Don't *say* that!"

"My Lord." Ralph patted her thigh with a free hand. "The way you carry on about guys you never even met." He shook his head and chuckled. "Him and his secret. Only he don't know *I* know, see? Boy howdy!"

"It's a hot night." She twitched the large wooden hoops nervously in her damp fingers.

"Don't change the subject. He'll be here, rain or shine."

Aimee shifted her weight.

Ralph seized her elbow. "Hey! You ain't mad? You wanna see that Dwarf, don't you? Sh!" Ralph turned. "Here he comes now!"

The Dwarf's hand, hairy and dark, appeared all by itself reaching up into the booth window with a silver dime. An invisible person called, "One!" in a high child's voice.

Involuntarily, Aimee bent forward.

The Dwarf looked up at her, resembling nothing more than a dark-eyed, dark-haired, ugly man who has been locked in a wine-press, squeezed and wadded down and down, fold on fold, agony on agony, until a bleached, outraged mass is left, the face bloated shapelessly, a face you knew must stare wide-eyed and awake at two and three and four o'clock in the morning, lying flat in bed, only the body asleep.

Ralph tore a yellow ticket in half. "One!"

The Dwarf, as if frightened by an approaching storm, pulled his black coat-lapels tightly about his throat and waddled swiftly. A

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moment later, ten thousand lost and wandering dwarfs wriggled between the mirror flats, like frantic dark beetles, and vanished.

"Quick!"

Ralph squeezed Aimee along a dark passage behind the mirrors. She felt him pat her all the way back through the tunnel to a thin partition with a peekhole.

"This is rich," he chuckled. "Go on — look."

Aimee hesitated, then put her face to the partition.

"You *see* him?" Ralph whispered.

Aimee felt her heart beating. A full minute passed.

There stood the Dwarf in the middle of the small blue room. His eyes were shut. He wasn't ready to open them yet. Now, now he opened his eyelids and looked at a large mirror set before him. And what he saw in the mirror made him smile. He winked, he pirouetted, he stood sidewise, he waved, he bowed, he did a little clumsy dance.

And the mirror repeated each motion with long, thin arms, with a tall, tall body, with a huge wink and an enormous repetition of the dance, ending in a *gigantic* bow!

"Every night the same thing," whispered Ralph in Aimee's ear. "Ain't that rich?"

Aimee turned her head and looked at Ralph steadily out of her motionless face, for a long time, and she said nothing. Then, as if she could not help herself, she moved her head slowly and very slowly back to stare once more through the opening. She held her breath. She felt her eyes begin to water.

Ralph nudged her, whispering.

"Hey, what's the little gink doin' *now?*"

They were drinking coffee and not looking at each other in the ticket booth half an hour later, when the Dwarf came out of the mirrors. He took his hat off and started to approach the booth when he saw Aimee, and hurried away.

"He wanted something," said Aimee.

"Yeah." Ralph squashed out his cigarette, idly. "I know *what*, too. But he hasn't got the nerve to ask. One night in this squeaky little voice he says, 'I bet those mirrors are expensive.' Well, I played dumb. I said yeah they were. He sort of looked at me, waiting, and when I didn't say any more, he went home, but next night he said, 'I bet those mirrors cost fifty, a hundred bucks.' I bet they do, I said. I laid me out a hand of solitaire."

"Ralph," she said.

He glanced up. "Why you *look* at me that way?"

"Ralph," she said, "why don't you sell him one of your extra ones?"

"Look, Aimee, do I tell you

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how to run your hoop circus?"

"How much do those mirrors cost?"

"I can get 'em secondhand for thirty-five bucks."

"Why don't you tell him where he can buy one, then?"

"Aimee, you're not smart." He laid his hand on her knee. She moved her knee away. "Even if I told him where to go, you think he'd buy one? Not on your life. And why? He's self-conscious. Why, if he even knew I knew he was flirtin' around in front of that mirror in Screwy Louie's Room, he'd never come back. He plays like he's goin' through the Maze to get lost, like everybody else. Pretends like he don't care about that special room. Always waits for business to turn bad, late nights, so he has that room to himself. What he does for entertainment on nights when business is good, God knows. No, sir, he wouldn't dare go buy a mirror anywhere. He ain't got no friends, and even if he did he couldn't ask them to buy him a thing like that. Pride, by God, pride. Only reason he even mentioned it to me is I'm practically the only guy he knows. Besides, *look* at him — he ain't got enough to buy a mirror like those. He might be savin' up, but where in hell in the world today can a dwarf work? Dime a dozen, drug on the market, outside of circuses."

"I feel awful. I feel sad." Aimee sat staring at the empty boardwalk. "Where does he live?"

"Flytrap down on the waterfront. The Ganghes Arms. Why?"

"I'm madly in love with him, if you must know."

Ralph grinned around his cigar. "Aimee," he said. "You and your *very* funny jokes."

A warm night, a hot morning, and a blazing noon. The sea was a sheet of burning tinsel and glass.

Aimee came walking, in the locked-up carnival alleys out over the warm sea, keeping in the shade, half a dozen sun-bleached magazines under her arm. She opened a flaking door and called into hot darkness. "Ralph?" She picked her way back through the black hall behind the mirrors, her heels tacking the wooden floor. "Ralph?"

Someone stirred sluggishly on a canvas cot. "Aimee?"

He sat up and screwed a dim light bulb into the dressing table socket. He squinted at her, half blinded. "Hey, you look like the cat swallowed a canary."

"Ralph, I came about the midget!"

"Dwarf, Aimee honey, dwarf. A midget is in the cells, born that way. A dwarf is in the glands . . ."

"Ralph! I just found out the most wonderful thing about him!"

"Honest to God," he said to his hands, holding them out as witnesses to his disbelief. "This

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woman! Who in hell gives two cents for some ugly little —"

"Ralph!" She held out the magazines, her eyes shining. "He's a writer! Think of that!"

"It's a pretty hot day for thinking." He lay back and examined her, smiling faintly.

"I just happened to pass the Ganghes Arms, and saw Mr. Greeley, the manager. He says the typewriter runs all night in Mr. Big's room!"

"Is *that* his name?" Ralph began to roar with laughter.

"Writes just enough pulp detective stories to live. I found one of his stories in the secondhand magazine place, and, Ralph, guess what?"

"I'm tired, Aimee."

"This little guy's got a soul as big as all outdoors; he's got *everything* in his head!"

"Why ain't he writin' for the big magazines, then, I ask you?"

"Because maybe he's afraid — maybe he doesn't know he can do it. That happens. People don't believe in themselves. But if he only tried, I bet he could sell stories anywhere in the world."

"Why ain't he rich, I wonder?"

"Maybe because ideas come slow because he's down in the dumps. Who wouldn't be? So small that way? I bet it's hard to think of anything except being so small and living in a one-room cheap apartment."

"Hell!" snorted Ralph. "You talk like Florence Nightingale's grandma."

She held up the magazine. "I'll read you part of his crime story. It's got all the guns and tough people, but it's told by a dwarf. I bet the editors never guess the author knew what he was writing about. Oh, please don't sit there like that, Ralph! Listen."

And she began to read aloud:

"'I am a dwarf and I am a murderer. The two things cannot be separated. One is the cause of the other.

"'The man I murdered used to stop me on the street when I was twenty-one, pick me up in his arms, kiss my brow, croon wildly to me, sing Rock-a-bye Baby, haul me into meat markets, toss me on the scales and cry, "Watch it. Don't weigh your thumb, there, butcher!"

"'Do you *see* how our lives moved toward murder? This fool, this persecutor of my flesh and soul!

"'As for my childhood: my my parents were small people, not quite dwarfs, not quite. My father's inheritance kept us in a doll's house, an amazing thing like a white-scrolled wedding cake, — little rooms, little chairs, miniature paintings, cameos, ambers with insects caught within, everything tiny, tiny, tiny! The world of Giants far away, an ugly rumor beyond the garden wall. Poor mama, papa! They meant only

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the best for me. They kept me, like a porcelain vase, small and treasured, to themselves, in our ant world, our beehive rooms, our microscopic library, our land of beetle-sized doors and moth windows. Only now do I see the magnificent size of my parents' psychosis! They must have dreamed they would live forever, keeping me like a butterfly under glass. But first father died, and then fire ate up the little house, the wasp's nest, and every postage-stamp mirror and salt-cellar closet within. Mama, too, gone! And myself alone, watching the fallen embers, tossed out into a world of Monsters and Titans, caught in a landslide of reality, rushed, rolled and smashed to the bottom of the cliff!

"'It took me a year to adjust. A job with a sideshow was unthinkable. There seemed no place for me in the world. And then, a month ago, the Persecutor came into my life, clapped a bonnet on my unsuspecting head, and cried to friends, "I want you to meet the little woman!"' "

Aimee stopped reading. Her hands were unsteady, and the magazine shook as she handed it to Ralph. "You finish it. The rest is a murder story. It's all right. But don't you *see?* That little man. That little man."

Ralph tossed the magazine aside and lit a cigarette lazily. "I- like westerns a lot better."

"Ralph, you *got* to read it. He needs someone to tell him how good he is and keep him writing."

Ralph looked at her, his head to one side. "And guess who's going to do it? Well, well, ain't we just the Saviour's right hand?"

"I won't listen!"

"Use your head, dammit! You go busting in on him he'll think you're handing him pity. He'll chase you screamin' outa his room."

She sat down, thinking about it slowly, trying to turn it over and see it from every side. "I don't know. Maybe you're right. Oh, it's not just pity, Ralph, honest. But maybe it'd look like it to him. I've got to be awful careful."

He shook her shoulder back and forth, pinching softly, with his fingers. "Hell, hell, lay off him, is all I ask; you'll get nothing but trouble for your dough. God, Aimee, I never *seen* you so hepped on anything. Look, you and me, let's make it a day, take a lunch, get us some gas, and just drive on down the coast as far as we can drive; swim, have supper, see a good show in some little town — to hell with the carnival, how about it? A damn nice day and no worries. I been savin' a coupla bucks."

"It's because I know he's different," she said, looking off into darkness. "It's because he's something we can never be — you and

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me and all the rest of us here on the pier. It's so funny, so funny. Life fixed him so he's good for nothing but carny shows, yet there *he* is on the land. And life made us so we wouldn't have to work in the carny shows, but here *we* are, anyway, way out here at sea on the pier. Sometimes it seems a million miles to shore. How come, Ralph, that we got the bodies, but he's got the brains and can think things we'll never even guess?"

"You haven't even been listening to me!" said Ralph.

She sat with him standing over her, his voice far away. Her eyes were half shut and her hands were in her lap, twitching.

"I don't like that shrewd type look you're getting on," he said, finally.

She opened her purse slowly and took out a small roll of bills and started counting. "Thirty-five, forty dollars. There! I'm going to phone Billie Fine and have him send out one of those tall type mirrors to Mr. Bigelow at the Ganghes Arms. Yes, I am!"

"What!"

"Think how wonderful for him, Ralph, having one in his own room *any* time he wants it. Can I use your phone?"

"Go ahead, *be* nutty."

Ralph turned quickly and walked off down the tunnel. A door slammed behind him.

Aimee waited, then after awhile put her hands to the phone and began to dial, with painful slowness. She paused between numbers, holding her breath, shutting her eyes, thinking how it might seem to be small in the world, and then one day someone sends a special mirror by. A mirror for your room where you can hide away with the big reflection of yourself, shining, and write stories and stories, never going out into the world unless you had to. How might it be then, alone, with the wonderful illusion all in one piece in the room. Would it make you happy or sad, would it help your writing or hurt it? She shook her head back and forth, back and forth. At least this way there would be no one to look down at you. Night after night, perhaps rising secretly at three in the cold morning, you could wink and dance around and smile and wave at yourself, so tall, so tall, so very fine and tall in the bright looking-glass.

A telephone voice said, "Billie Fine's."

"Oh, *Billie!*" she cried.

Night came in over the pier. The ocean lay dark and loud under the planks. Ralph sat cold and waxen in his glass coffin, laying out the cards, his eyes fixed, his mouth stiff. At his elbow, a growing pyramid of burnt cigarette butts grew larger. When

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Aimee walked along under the hot red and blue bulbs, smiling, waving, he did not stop setting the cards down slow and very slow. "Hi, Ralph!" she said.

"How's the love affair?" he asked, drinking from a dirty glass of iced water. "How's Charlie Boyer, or is it Gary Grant?"

"I just went and bought me a new hat," she said, smiling. "Gosh, I feel *good!* You know why? Billie Fine's sending a mirror out tomorrow! Can't you just see the nice little guy's face?"

"I'm not so hot at imagining."

"Oh, Lord, you'd think I was going to *marry* him or something."

"Why not? Carry him around in a suitcase. People say, Where's your husband? all you do is open your bag, yell, *Here* he is! Like a silver cornet. Take him outa his case any old hour, play a tune, stash him away. Keep a little sandbox for him on the back porch."

"I was feeling so good," she said.

"Benevolent is the word." Ralph did not look at her, his mouth tight. "Ben-ev-o-*lent*. I suppose this all comes from me watching him through that knothole, getting my kicks? *That* why you sent the mirror? People like you run around with tambourines, taking the joy out of my life."

"Remind me not to come to your place for drinks any more. I'd rather go with no people at all than *mean* people."

Ralph exhaled a deep breath. "Aimee, Aimee. Don't you know you can't help that guy? He's bats. And this crazy thing of yours is like saying, Go ahead, *be* batty, I'll help you, pal."

"Once in a lifetime anyway, it's nice to make a mistake if you think it'll do somebody some good," she said.

"God deliver me from do-gooders, Aimee."

"Shut up, shut up!" she cried, and then said nothing more.

He let the silence lie awhile, and then got up, putting his fingerprinted glass aside. "Mind the booth for me?"

"Sure. Why?"

She saw ten thousand cold white images of him stalking down the glassy corridors, between mirrors, his mouth straight and his fingers working themselves.

She sat in the booth for a full minute and then suddenly shivered. A small clock ticked in the booth and she turned the deck of cards over, one by one, waiting. She heard a hammer pounding and knocking and pounding again, far away inside the Maze; a silence, more waiting, and then ten thousand images folding and refolding and dissolving, Ralph striding, looking out at ten thousand images of her in the booth.

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She heard his quiet laughter as he came down the ramp.

"Well, what's put you in such a good mood?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Aimee," he said, carelessly, "we shouldn't quarrel. You say tomorrow Billie Fine's sending that mirror out to Mr. Big's?"

"You're not going to try anything funny?"

"Me?" He moved her out of the booth and took over the cards, humming, his eyes bright. "Not me, oh no, not me." He did not look at her, but started quickly to slap out the cards. She stood behind him. Her right eye began to twitch a little. She folded and unfolded her arms. A minute ticked by. The only sound was the ocean under the night pier, Ralph breathing in the heat, the soft ruffle of the cards. The sky over the pier was hot and thick with clouds. Out at sea, faint glows of lightning were beginning to show.

"Ralph," she said at last.

"Relax, Aimee," he said.

"About that trip you wanted to take down the coast —"

"Tomorrow," he said. "Maybe next month. Maybe next year. Old Ralph Banghart's a patient guy. I'm not worried, Aimee. Look." He held up a hand. "I'm calm."

She waited for a roll of thunder at sea to fade away.

"I just don't want you mad, is all. I just don't want anything bad to happen, promise me."

The wind, now warm, now cool, blew along the pier. There was a smell of rain on the wind. The clock ticked. Aimee began to perspire heavily, watching the cards move and move. Distantly, you could hear targets being hit and the sound of the pistols at the shooting gallery.

And then, there he was.

Waddling along the lonely concourse, under the insect bulbs, his face twisted and dark, every movement an effort. From a long way down the pier he came, with Aimee watching. She wanted to say to him, This is your last night, the last time you'll have to embarrass yourself by coming here, the last time you'll have to put up with being watched by Ralph, even in secret. She wished she could cry out and laugh and say it right in front of Ralph. But she said nothing.

"Hello, hello!" shouted Ralph. "It's free, on the house, tonight! Special for old customers!"

The Dwarf looked up, startled, his little black eyes darting and swimming in confusion. His mouth formed the word thanks and he turned, one hand to his neck, pulling his tiny lapels tight up about his convulsing throat, the other hand clenching the silver dime secretly. Looking back, he gave a little nod, and then scores

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of dozens of compressed and tortured faces, burnt a strange dark color by the lights, wandered in the glass corridors.

"Ralph," Aimee took his elbow. "What's going on?"

He grinned. "I'm being benevolent, Aimee, benevolent."

"Ralph," she said.

"Sh," he said. "*Listen.*"

They waited in the booth in the long warm silence.

Then, a long way off, muffled, there was a scream.

"Ralph!" said Aimee.

"Listen, listen!" he said.

There was another scream, and another and still another, and a threshing and a pounding and a breaking, a rushing around and through the maze. There, there, wildly colliding and richocheting from mirror to mirror, shrieking hysterically and sobbing, tears on his face, mouth gasped open, came Mr. Bigelow. He fell out into the blazing night air, glanced about wildly, wailed, and ran off down the pier.

"Ralph, what happened?"

Ralph sat laughing and slapping his thighs.

She slapped his face. "What'd you *do?*"

He didn't quite stop laughing. "Come on. I'll show you!"

And then she was in the maze, rushed from white-hot mirror to mirror, seeing her lipstick all red fire a thousand times repeated on down a burning silver cavern where strange hysterical women much like herself followed a quick-moving, smiling man. "Come on!" he cried. And they broke free into a dust-smelling tiny room.

"Ralph!" she said.

They both stood on the threshold of the little room where the Dwarf had come every night for a year. They both stood where the Dwarf had stood each night, before opening his eyes to see the miraculous image in front of him.

Aimee shuffled slowly, one hand out, into the dim room.

The mirror had been changed.

This new mirror made even normal people small, small, small; it made even tall people little and dark and twisted smaller as you moved forward.

"Let's drink to Evolution again. That one slays me."

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And Aimee stood before it thinking and thinking that if it made big people small, standing here, God, what would it do to a dwarf, a tiny dwarf, a dark dwarf, a lonely dwarf?

She turned and almost fell. Ralph stood looking at her. "Ralph," she said. "God, why did you do it?"

"Aimee, come back!"

She ran out through the mirrors, crying. Staring with blurred eyes, it was hard to find the way, but she found it. She stood blinking at the empty pier, started to run one way, then another, then still another, then stopped. Ralph came up behind her, talking, but it was like a voice heard behind a wall late at night, remote and foreign.

"Don't talk to me," she said.

"Aimee, it was just a joke —"

Someone came running up the pier. It was Mr. Kelly from the shooting gallery. "Hey, any you see a little guy just now? Little stiff swiped a pistol from my place, loaded, run off before I'd get a hand on him! You help me find him?"

And Kelly was gone, sprinting, turning his head to search between all the canvas sheds, on away under the hot blue and red and yellow strung bulbs.

Aimee rocked back and forth and took a step.

"Aimee, where you going?"

She looked at Ralph as if they had just turned a corner, strangers passing, and bumped into each other. "I guess," she said, "I'm going to help search."

"You won't be able to do nothing."

"I go to try, anyway. Oh God, Ralph, this is *all* my fault! I shouldn't have phoned Billie Fine! I shouldn't've ordered a mirror and got you so mad you did this! It's *me* should've gone to Mr. Big, not a crazy thing like I bought! I'm going to find him if it's the last thing I do in my life."

Swinging about slowly, her cheeks wet, she saw the quivery mirrors that stood in front of the Maze. Ralph's reflection was in one of them. She could not take her eyes away from the image; it held her in a cool and trembling fascination, with her mouth open.

"Aimee, what's wrong? What're you —"

He sensed where she was looking and twisted about to see what was going on. His eyes widened.

He scowled at the mirror.

A horrid, ugly little man, two feet high, with a pale, squashed face under an ancient straw hat, scowled back at him. Ralph stood there glaring at himself.

Aimee walked slowly and then began to walk fast and then began to run. She ran down the empty pier and the wind blew warm and it blew large drops of hot rain on her all the time she was running.

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SCREAM AT SEA

BY ALGIS BUDRYS

In tight spots, the veneer of civilization is something to be reckoned with. Take the man and the cat in this tale of great peril. The man dutifully observed all the amenities because he was a superior being. And it was the thing to do — but the cat survived.

THE principal feature of Harry Meglow's life had been his ability to escape from seemingly complete disaster. True, his means of escape usually required flight to out-of-the-way corners, but Harry had been tailored by some Providence with the foresight to insure that he would feel at home in them.

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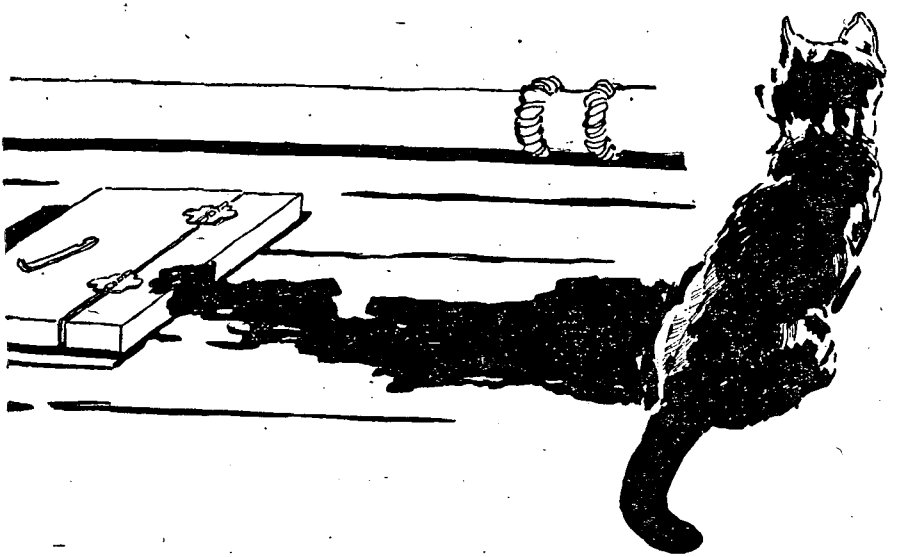
Illustrator: Ernie Barth



Consequently, he had found life in Venezuela not disagreeable, and not financially unrewarding. However, it became necessary, as a result of the latter circumstance, to find urgent employment as a cook's helper on a Panamanian tanker which had the desirable quality of departing for Lisbon almost immediately. He might have preferred a more elevated position, but he was completely ignorant of the sea. Moreover, hustling slops is still preferable to a South American jail and the good offices of the Venezuelan penal code.

The tanker was a thousand miles into the Atlantic when Meglow's special kind of good fortune reasserted itself. He was standing casually on deck, scratching the ears of the cook's cat, when some spark touched off the cargo of casing head.

High-test gasoline, pound for pound, is one of the more vicious explosives. Meglow found himself in the sea, and it was not until he tried to scramble aboard a raft that had whirled into the water near him that he became sufficiently conscious of what had happened to notice that the cat was

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still in his arms. He tossed it aboard and pulled himself up after it.

He and the cat were equally uncomprehending observers as the tanker tore itself completely open with one final blast, fountaining debris and fire in the singularly spectacular manner of tankers.

It was near twilight. Meglow found no survivors in the darkening water — or, rather, none cried out or swam toward him as the raft drifted away. This fact did not particularly bother him, for he was used to the undemanding company of himself. The thought that he was alone in the Atlantic was not particularly disquieting either, for by now the roots of his faith in the inevitable survival of Harry Meglow were sunk deep into the past, so thoroughly intertwined with every significant event in his life that it was a fundamentally optimistic Harry Meglow whose raft carried him farther and farther from the place where the tanker had wallowed down into the sea.

So, once he had accustomed himself to the raft's staccato motion on the choppy water, he was able to sleep without first giving any special thought to his present situation, the sequence of preceding events which had brought him to it, or the course of the future.

He woke up once during the night. The chop had subsided, but an overcast had left the ocean almost completely black, without stars or moonlight. He stared around him at the featureless unfamiliarity of the Atlantic at night, hearing no sound except the slap of water against the raft and the sibillance of his breath.

The water around him was pouring out the warmth it had stored up during the day. Nevertheless, his wet clothing was a cold and clinging shell around him. He tried to peel off his sweater, but the sodden wool bound around his neck and shoulders, smothering him, and he fought his face free with a flail of his arms and a frantic twist of his body. Breathing in spasms, he pulled the sweater back down over his stomach, but in a few minutes he managed a chuckle, and a little later he was asleep again.

He was awakened in the morning by the clawing and meowing of the cat. He rolled over, pushed the animal away from him, and stretched. The slats of the raft's superstructure were 1 x 2 lumber, spaced a half inch apart — an unyielding surface that stiffened muscle, bruised bone, and cut into skin. His sweater had shrunk, and clung tightly to his chest and arms. Both it and his dungarees were stiff and crusted with salt. His skin itched. He put his hand up to his eyebrows and hair. They were clogged and sticky. He grimaced in disgust.

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It was too early to tell, but he thought he might be getting a cold. His nasal passages were congested, and his throat was raw. Perhaps it was merely irritation from salt water inhaled during his frantic lunge for the raft. If it was a genuine cold — well, at least he was alive to have it.

He stood up and moved about in bursts of energy, quickening his circulation. It took him a while to become accustomed to the yielding surface the raft presented, but he was soon able to adjust his movements to it. He began to look around the raft.

The raft itself was more properly a float. It consisted of a slat superstructure around and on a series of metal drums — one of them, a makeshift replacement, actually was an empty oil drum — and stood about a foot out of the water. It was well in keeping with the ship from which it had come.

He found the food locker and watertank after a short while, sunken into the superstructure. There was a considerable supply of biscuits and some canned stuff with a Spanish label that turned out to be ham. He had no way of estimating how long it would last him, but there certainly seemed to be enough of it for some time to come. The watertank was full, and he had no great worries there, either, though again he did not know how many days' supply this actually was. To the problem of survival and rescue, he brought only his perversely optimistic fatalism.

He dug some ham out of the can with his fingers and began to eat it. When the cat rubbed up against his leg and wailed, he bent down absently and put some food on the deck for her, where she ate it hungrily. As he ate, he continued to survey his surroundings.

The raft was on smooth water, with a clear blue, white-flecked sky overhead. The wooden slats of the raft were warped in places, and some pieces of the deck — the top of a raft could be called a deck, he decided — had been replaced, the newer wood contrasting with the old, which was weathered and dotted with black pockmarks where the heads of nails had lost their paint and corroded. The entire raft needed repainting badly.

He finished the ham and threw the can overside, after which he bent down to the watertank for a drink.

The tank, as far as he could see, was the only piece of modern — or almost modern — equipment on the raft. It had a lid with a cup clipped to the underside, and a rubber seal to prevent as much evaporation as possible. He drank thirstily, then refilled the cup and set it down on the deck for the cat.

Idly, he swept his glance around

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the horizon, not especially hoping to see a ship, and was only mildly disappointed when he did not. There was something vaguely disquieting about the empty sea, not for its lack of any sign of rescue, but because of the sense that he was the only living man in at least thirteen hundred square miles — that is, if his memory was right about the horizon line being about twenty miles away, and if the formula for the area of a circle *was* $A = \pi R^2$. The raft, hencoop of a structure that it was, embodied the only evidence that anything of Man had ever stirred this featureless water.

Meglow had never in his life been twenty miles away from another human being. The visualization of himself alone in the middle of a vast circle of emptiness was completely outside his experience.

He looked at the water around him again. It was no different from what it was in one direction than in another. It was all smooth water, apparently changing from dirty green to blue as it stretched farther away, but he knew that actually, even beyond the horizon, it was still dirty green.

Becoming conscious for the first time of the volume of sheer emptiness that an ocean could present, he lost some of the sense of romantic adventure which he had felt up to now — and still felt, but to a lesser degree. Still optimistic, if somewhat subdued, he spent the remainder of the day simply sitting on the raft with his hands around his knees, occasionally stroking the cat, which seemed to be having little difficulty in adjusting to a ten-by-ten environment. After eating some more ham, and drinking another cupful of water, he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the pitching and bucking of the raft, which shook with a completely unfamiliar and mechanical vibration. The cat, somewhere in the darkness beside him, was scratching at the slats.

He looked to his left, and saw something huge and gray slipping past him in the blackness. Running lights tracked a colored line across the sky, and the open door of a radio shack was a moving square of light. Paralyzed, he crouched on the bucking raft, riding the white froth of the ship's wake. When he finally managed to shout, the sound was thin and empty under the beat of the propeller in the water, and he knew it had not carried to the deck.

"Hey! Hey there! *For God's sake* —"

He shouted after the retreating ship for a long time, rasping his throat, and it was only after the raft had steadied down once more that he stopped, realizing with even greater force just how large an ocean was, how rare a thing had just occurred, and passed

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him by. Even on the deck of a ship, the closeness of bulkheads and cargo booms made the sea a thing that was somehow not as desolate as it actually was. Only a man alone on a miniscule platform of warped and dirty slatting could appreciate the closeness, the immediacy of the ocean. To a man on a ship, the sea was a stretch of broad uniformity which carried him on its back. To a man on a raft, the sea was a wilderness.

His heart was pounding. He could not sleep. When it began to rain shortly thereafter, he lay down flat on his stomach, his hands over the back of his head, the slats digging into his face. He felt the cat burrowing against him, but he continued to lie stiff and unmoving. It was up to her to take care of herself.

It rained into daylight. He was stiff and wet, and now he definitely had a cold. Moreover, either because the raft was bobbing on a chop even heavier than that of the first day, or as a reaction to his disappointment during the night, he was feeling sick. His eyes were burning, and his mouth was full of a thick spittle that tasted like corroded copper. The back passages of his nose felt swollen, he was nauseous, and his throat was ragged from the periodic rushes of bile that fought their way up into his esophagous. He was coughing a little.

He looked at the cat, which was huddled miserably against him, and this somehow made him feel better. He managed to chuckle at her cries.

The fact that he was still able to laugh made him feel better, and once the mood had been cracked, it broke and left him optimistic again, in spite of the steady downpour of rain and his coughing, which was complicating his nausea.

All right, so he's missed the ship. For all he knew, it was headed for Venezuela, where the police would be only too happy to have him. As a matter of fact, the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that something unpleasant would have awaited him aboard that vessel. No disaster in his life, no matter how serious it had been at first look, had ever really been as bad as it seemed. He had gotten into trouble in the States, and had found his way to South America. Once there, he had gotten quite a bit of money. Of course, he'd had to run for it, but the tanker had been readily available. And when the tanker exploded, he had survived. Come to think of it, it was probably because some harm waited for him in Lisbon that the ship had sunk.

He stared out over the white-capped ocean at the steel-gray horizon, and some of this new mood left him. He began to worry about the possibility of a full-

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fledged storm. Somehow, the sea seemed to be outside the abilities of his protecting destiny. On the raft, he was still Harry Meglow, still a living human being, with faith in himself and the future. But the Atlantic ran a foot below him, and in the Atlantic he would be a chip, an insignificant, purposeless something that would drift through the water for days before the pulped and fish-eaten remains settled down to the soundless bottom.

He tried to visualize the death of Harry Meglow. He tried to picture a world without him — and failed.

It rained until very late in the day, when the clouds broke and left the ocean in sunset. He was able to eat and drink a little. He fed the cat at the same time. She seemed to have come through the rain without any harm, and although her fur was still damp, it was drying rapidly. He became conscious of his own wetness. The temperature had dropped, and he began to shiver. His cough had gotten worse, and the glands in his throat had swollen, so that every time he swallowed, a painful pressure caught him around the neck. The breath whistling out of his nostrils was hot, and he knew he had a fever.

This time, he managed to get the sweater off. He sat with the wind chilling his bare skin, until finally he stood up, took off the dungarees as well, and began to exercise violently. He was warm and dry in a few minutes, but it would be hours before his clothes would dry. He was caught with the choice of putting them on again, or of remaining naked, in which case he would have to keep moving around.

Even as he considered the matter, he cooled off again, and began swinging his arms and running in place.

After five hours, the dungarees were dry enough to wear, and he put them on gratefully. The sweater was still wet, and he crouched on the slats with his arms folded over his chest. He tried hugging the cat for warmth, but she clawed at his arms and finally bit his hand. He dropped her with a curse and barely restrained himself from flinging her into the ocean.

The following day, the fever was worse, and his eyes were burning badly. Each time he swallowed, his eardrums popped, and his throat was almost closed. His bones ached, and there was a sharp pain in his chest. His vision was a little blurred.

When he got to his feet, the headache that pounded his skull made him stagger, and he closed his eyes at the pain. The cat was hungry again, and he opened a can of ham. By now, he had come to hate the salty taste and the

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mushy consistency, but he forced down a few mouthfuls and left the rest for the cat, which had a difficult time eating out of the flat, narrow can, but made the best of it. He opened the lid of the water-tank and drank a cupful of water, setting another cupful down for the cat, but when he lurched away, his foot struck the cup, and kicked it overside.

He stared at the place where it had gone over, his face dull, but then he shrugged. He could always use an empty ham can to bring water up out of the tank. The cat would go thirsty in the meantime, but that was the cat's problem. He collapsed on the deck, and lay staring at the sea.

On his side, as he was, his eyes were only a little more than a foot above the water. The illusion that he was actually in the sea had grown more powerful, and a corresponding fear of the Atlantic had grown with it.

It was not merely the realization of the ocean's incredible area that overwhelmed him. It was the knowledge that the ocean was as old as all the Earth itself, and as enduring. Where the wrecked tanker had been, there was not even a dimple in the water. A ship had passed him in the night, tossing the water under his raft. Where was the ship? Where was the wake? They had existed for a few moments, then disappeared, and left the sea unmarked.

He realized that the sea could take him, and that the ripples would not reach a hundred yards. There would be no marker, no sign to the world that it had lost him.

"No!" The word burst out of him, a croaked shout. He sat up, trembling, sharp chills running through his body, his chest heaving as he coughed. Somehow, he would live through this. The sea would not have him.

He fell back, his jaw clenched, his body rigid, his hands in tight fists.

But that night it rained again, a cold, sharply driven rain from the north that first cooled his dry and feverish skin, but which was soon an icy slick that shot his temperature up and had him delirious by morning. He thrashed about on the raft, retching past the agony in his throat. The raft was tossing badly, and the cat had dug its claws into one leg of his dungarees in an effort to hang on.

Enough consciousness returned to permit a lance of fear at the thought that he might roll off the raft. Shuddering with chills, his teeth chattering, he got to his hands and knees and took off his belt. He passed it around a slat and buckled it around his waist again. Then the bone-wrenching fever took hold of him again, and he lost consciousness.

He regained consciousness once

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more, and lay staring up into the bright sky, with his eyes running from the fever. The pain in his chest was like a spike transfixing him. He tried to move, could not, and remembered the belt. His cracked lips twisted into a grimace as he plucked at it feebly but could not find the buckle. He heard a scratching sound, and turned his head. The cat was clawing at the trap over the food locker and the watertank. His own mouth was dry, and he tried to open the belt once more, but when he finally located the buckle, he could not open it. His hands were weak, robbed of strength.

Dully, he turned his head in the opposite direction, and looked at the sea.

Once again, and for the last time, his perverse luck had made sure that things were not as bad as they might have been. The sea would not get him.

He coughed, and smiled at the pain. His breath was hoarse — harsh, labored. No, the sea had not killed him. He was going to die of pneumonia. He had not starved, or died of thirst, or been swept overboard. The sea had lost. He snorted again, a painful "huh" that gusted from his nostrils.

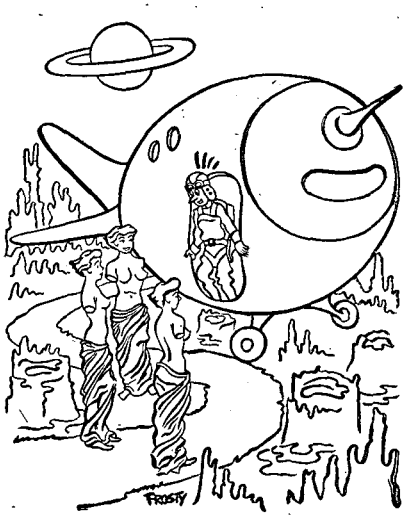
The cat was clawing at his leg. He managed to raise his hand and swing it through the air, and the cat jumped back, mewing.

"Sor — sorry, cat," he grunted. "Nobody's going to — be around — to open — any food for — you."

His head fell back, and he chuckled. He had even managed to leave a living thing behind to regret his passing. Somehow, the thought appealed to him.

And then he realized to what precise end his special Providence had brought him, and he found the energy, buried deep in his system somewhere, to cry out, the harsh yell flinging itself over the whitecaps. He braced his shoulders against the deck and tried to break free, but the effort drained him, and he collapsed. He lay motionless, except for the tears that poured from his eyes.

The raft was picked up three weeks later by a Brazilian tramp. The cat had not starved to death. It was not even hungry.



"Pardon me — is this Venus?"

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THE WILL

BY WALTER M. MILLER JR.

It has been said that our children do not belong to us — that we are only their custodians for a little time — that what confuses them can also confuse us — and, that in times of great crisis, they turn instinctively to the source of true understanding.

THE will of a child. A child who played in the sun and ran over the meadow to chase with his dog among the trees beyond the hedge, and knew the fierce passions of childhood. A child whose logic cut corners and sought shortest distances, and found them. A child who made shining life in my house.

Red blood count low, wildly fluctuating . . . Chronic fatigue, loss of weight, general lethargy of function . . . Noticeable pallor and muscular atrophy . . . the first symptoms.

That was eight months ago.

Last Summer, the specialists conferred over him. When they had finished, I went to Doc Jules' office — alone, because I was afraid it was going to be bad, and Cleo couldn't take it. He gave it to me straight.

"We can't cure him, Rod. We can only treat symptoms — and hope the research labs come through. I'm sorry."

"He'll die?"

"Unless the labs get an answer."

"How long?"

"Months." He gave it to me bluntly — maybe because he thought I was hard enough to take it, and maybe because he knew I was only Kenny's foster father, as if blood-kinship would have made it any worse.

"Thanks for letting me know," I said, and got my hat.

I would have to tell Cleo, somehow. It was going to be tough. I left the building and went out to buy a paper. A magazine on the science rack caught my eye. It had an article entitled *Carcinogenesis and Carbon-14*, and there was a mention of leukemia in the blurb. I bought it along with the paper, and went over to the park to read. Anything to keep from carrying the news to Cleo.

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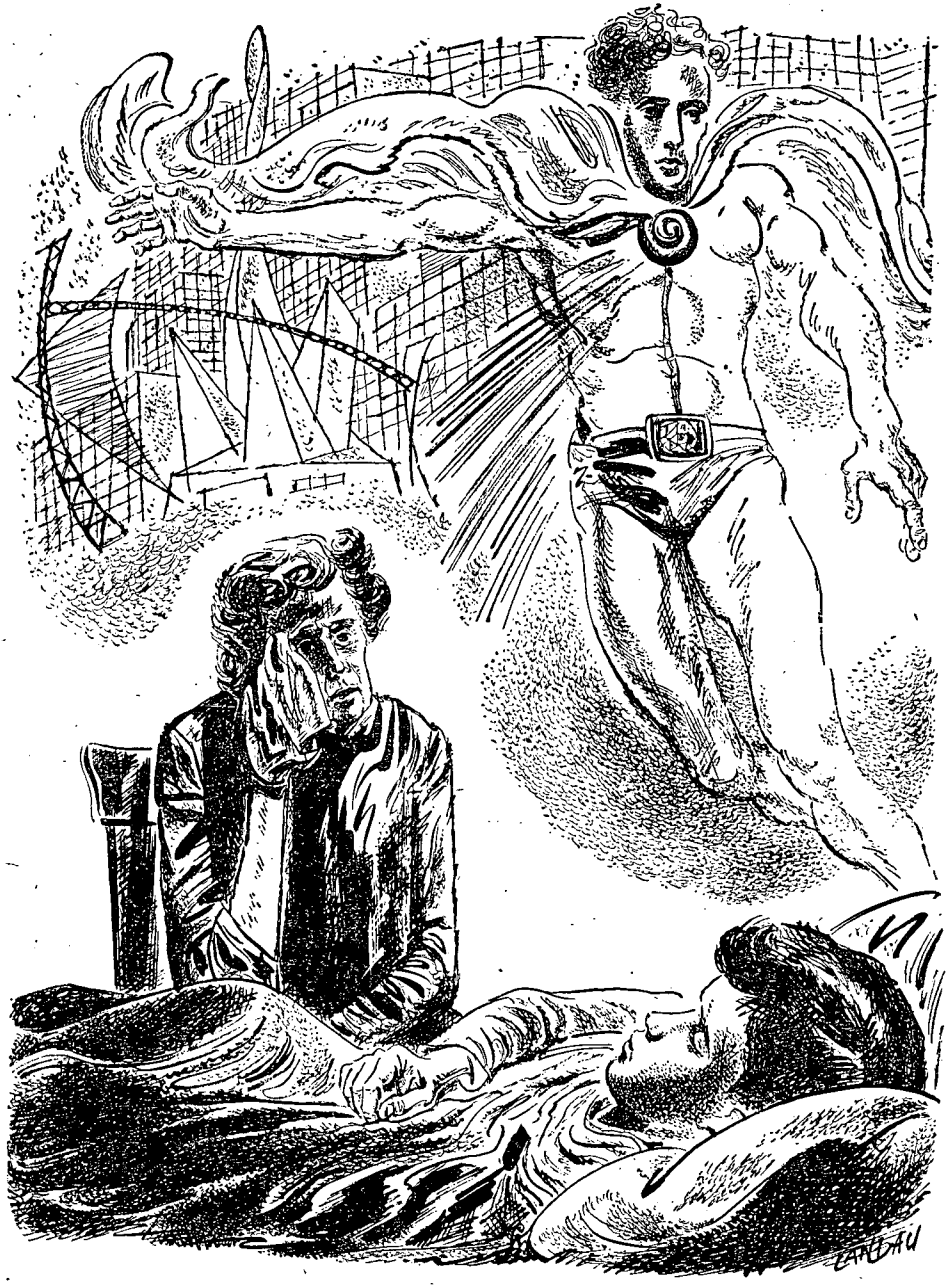

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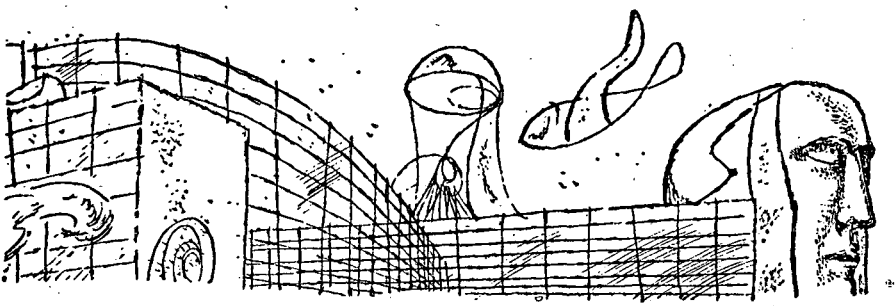

The research article made things worse. They were still doing things to rats and cosmic rays, and the word "cure" wasn't mentioned once. I dropped the magazine on the grass and glanced at the front page. A small headline toward the bottom of the page said: COMMUNITY PRAYS THREE DAYS FOR DYING CHILD. Same old sob-stuff — publicity causes country to focus on some luckless incurable, and deluge the family with sympathy, advice, money, and sincere and ardent pleas for divine intervention.

I wondered if it would be like that for Kenny — and instinctively I shuddered.

I took a train out to the suburbs, picked up the car, and drove home before twilight. I parked in front, because Cleo was out in back, taking down clothes from the line. The blinds were down in the living room, and the lantern-jawed visage of Captain Chronos looked out sternly from the television screen. The Captain carried an LTR (local-time-reversal) gun at the ready, and peered warily from side to side through an oval hole in the title film. Kenny's usual early-evening fodder.

"*Travel through the centuries with the master of the clock!*" the announcer was chanting.

"Hi, kid," I said to the hunched up figure who sat before the set, worshipping his hero.

"*Sssshhhhhhhh!*" He glanced at me irritably, then transferred his individual attention back to the title film.

"Sorry," I muttered. "Didn't know you listened to the opening spiel. It's always the same."

He squirmed, indicating that he wanted me to scram — to leave him to his own devices.

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I scrammed to the library, but the excited chant of the audio was still with me. ". . . *Captain Chronos, Custodian of Time, Defender of the Temporal Passes, Champion of the Temporal Guard. Fly with Captain Chronos in his time-ship* Century *as he battles against those evil forces who would* —"

I shut the door for a little quiet, then went to the encyclopedia shelf and took down "LAC-MOE." An envelope fell out of the heavy volume, and I picked it up. Kenny's. He had scrawled "Lebanon, do not open until 1964; value in 1954: 38¢," on the face. I knew what was inside without holding it up to the light: stamps. Kenny's idea of buried treasure; when he had more than one stamp of an issue in his collection, he'd stash the duplicate away somewhere to let it age, having heard that age increases their value.

When I finished reading the brief article, I went out to the kitchen. Cleo was bringing in a basket of clothes. She paused in the doorway, the basket cocked on her hip, hair disheveled, looking pretty but anxious.

"Did you see him?" she asked.

I nodded, unable to look at her, poured myself a drink. She waited a few seconds for me to say something. When I couldn't say anything, she dropped the basket of clothes, scattering underwear and linens across the kitchen floor, and darted across the room to seize my arms and stare up at me wildly.

"Rod! It *isn't* —"

But it was. Without stopping to think, she rushed to the living room, seized Kenny in her arms, began sobbing, then fled upstairs when she realized what she was doing.

Kenny knew he was sick. He knew several specialists had studied his case. He knew that I had gone down to talk with Doc Jules this afternoon. After Cleo's reaction, there was no keeping the truth from him. He was only fourteen, but within two weeks, he knew he had less than a year to live, unless they found a cure. He pieced it together for himself from conversational fragments, and chance remarks, and medical encyclopedias, and by deftly questioning a playmate's older brother who was a medical student.

Maybe it was easier on Kenny to know he was dying, easier than seeing our anxiety and being frightened by it without knowing the cause. But a child is blunt in his questioning, and tactless in matters that concern himself, and that made it hell on Cleo.

"If they don't find a cure, when will I die?"

"Will it hurt?"

"What will you do with my things?"

"Will I see my real father afterwards?"

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Cleo stood so much of it, and then one night she broke down, and we had to call a doctor to give her a sedative and quiet her down. When she was settled, I took Kenny out behind the house. We walked across the narrow strip of pasture and sat on the old stone fence to talk by the light of the moon. I told him not to talk about it again to Cleo, unless she brought it up, and that he was to bring his questions to me. I put my arm around him, and I knew he was crying inside.

"I don't want to die."

There is a difference between tragedy and blind brutal calamity. Tragedy has meaning, and there is dignity in it. Tragedy stands with its shoulders stiff and proud. But there is no meaning, no dignity, no fulfillment, in the death of a child.

"Kenny, I want you to try to have faith. The research institutes are working hard. I want you to try to have faith that they'll find a cure."

"Mack says it won't be for years and years."

Mack was the medical student. I resolved to call him tomorrow. But his mistake was innocent; he didn't know what was the matter with Kenny.

"Mack doesn't know. He's just a kid himself. Nobody knows — except that they'll find it sometime. Nobody knows when. It might be next week."

"I wish I had a time-ship like Captain Chronos."

"Why?"

He looked at me earnestly in the moonlight. "Because then I could go to some year when they knew how to cure me."

"I wish it were possible."

"I'll bet it is. I'll bet someday they can do that too. Maybe the government's working on it now."

I told him I'd heard nothing of such a project.

"Then they ought to be. Think of the advantages. If you wanted to know something that nobody knew, you could just go to some year when it had already been discovered."

I told him that it wouldn't work, because then everybody would try it, and nobody would work on new discoveries, and none would be made.

"Besides, Kenny, nobody can even prove time-travel is possible."

"Scientists can do anything."

"Only things that are possible, Kenny. And only with money, and time, and work — and a reason."

"Would it cost a lot to research for a time-ship, Dad?"

"Quite a lot, I imagine, if you could find somebody to do it."

"As much as the atom-bomb?"

"Maybe."

"I bet you could borrow it from banks . . . if somebody could prove it's possible."

"You'd need a lot of money of

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your own, kid, before the banks would help."

"I bet my stamp collection will be worth a lot of money someday. And my autograph book." The conversation had wandered off into fantasy.

"In time, maybe in time. A century maybe. But banks won't wait that long."

He stared at me peculiarly. "But Dad, don't you see? *What difference does time make*, if you're working on a time-machine?"

That one stopped me. "Try to have faith in the medical labs, Kenny," was all I could find to say.

Kenny built a time-ship in the fork of a big maple. He made it from a packing crate, reinforced with plywood, decorated with mysterious coils of copper wire. He filled it with battered clocks and junkyard instruments. He mounted two seats in it, and dual controls. He made a fish-bowl canopy over a hole in the top, and nailed a galvanized bucket on the nose. Broomstick guns protruded from its narrow weapon ports. He painted it silvery gray, and decorated the bucket-nose with the insignia of Captain Chronos and the Guardsmen of Time. He nailed steps on the trunk of the maple; and when he wasn't in the house, he could usually be found in the maple, piloting the time-ship through imaginary centuries. He took a picture of it with a box camera, and sent a print of it to Captain Chronos with a fan letter.

Then one day he fainted on the ladder, and fell out of the tree.

He wasn't badly hurt, only bruised, but it ended his career as a time-ship pilot. Kenny was losing color and weight, and the lethargy was coming steadily over him. His fingertips were covered with tiny stab-marks from the constant blood counts, and the hollow of his arm was marked with transfusion needles. Mostly, he stayed inside.

We haunted the research institutes, and the daily mail was full of answers to our flood of pleading inquiries — all kinds of answers.

"We regret to inform you that recent studies have been . . ."

"Investigations concerning the psychogenic factors show only . . ."

"Prepare to meet God . . ."

"For seventy-five dollars, Guru Tahaj Reshvi guarantees . . ."

"Sickness is only an illusion. Have faith and . . ."

"We cannot promise anything in the near future, but the Institute is rapidly finding new directions for . . ."

"Allow us to extend sympathy . . ."

"The powers of hydromagnetic massage therapy have been established by . . ."

And so it went. We talked to crackpots, confidence men, re-

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spectable scientists, fanatics, lunatics, and a few honest fools. Occasionally we tried some harmless technique, with Jules' approval, mostly because it felt like we were doing *something*. But the techniques did more good for Cleo than they did for Kenny, and Kenny's very gradual change for the worse made it apparent that nothing short of the miraculous could save him.

And then Kenny started working on it himself.

The idea, whatever it was, must have hit him suddenly, and it was strange — because it came at a time when both Cleo and I thought that he had completely and fatalistically accepted the coming of the end.

"The labs aren't going to find it in time," he said. "I've been reading what they say. I know it's no good, Dad." He cried some then; it was good that he had relearned to cry.

But the next day, his spirits soared mysteriously to a new high, and he went around the house singing to himself. He was busy with his stamp collection most of the time, but he also wandered about the house and garage searching for odds and ends, his actions seeming purposeful and determined. He moved slowly, and stopped to rest frequently, but he displayed more energy than we had seen for weeks, and even Jules commented on how bright he was looking, when he came for Kenny's daily blood sample. Cleo decided that complete resignation had brought cheerfulness with it, and that acceptance of ill-fate obviated the need to worry or hope. But I wasn't so sure.

"What've you been up to, Kenny?" I asked.

He looked innocent and shook his head.

"Come on, now. You don't go wandering around muttering to yourself unless you're cooking something up. What is it, another time-ship? I heard you hammering in the garage before dinner."

"I was just knocking the lid off an old breadbox."

I couldn't get any answer but evasions, innocent glances, and mysterious smirks. I let him keep his secret, thinking that his enthusiasm for whatever it was he was doing would soon wear off.

Then the photographers came.

"We want to take a picture of Kenny's treehouse," they explained.

"Why? — and how did you know he had one?" I demanded.

It developed that somebody was doing a feature-article on the effects of science-fantasy television shows on children. It developed that the "somebody" was being hired by a publicity agency which was being hired by the advertisers who presented Captain Chronos and the Guardsmen

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of Time. It developed that Kenny's fan letter, with the snapshot of his treehouse time-ship, had been forwarded to the publicity department by the producer of the show. They wanted a picture of the time-ship with Kenny inside, looking out through the fishbowl canopy.

"It's impossible," I told them.

They showed me a dozen pictures of moppets with LTR-guns, moppets in time-warp suits, moppets wearing Captain Chronos costumes, moppets falling free in space, and moppets playing Time-Pirate in the park.

"I'm sorry, but it's impossible," I insisted.

"We'll be glad to pay something for it, if . . ."

"The kid's sick, if you must know," I snapped. "He can't do it, and that's that, so forget about it."

"Maybe when he's feeling better . . . ?"

"He *won't* be feeling better," Cleo interrupted, voice tense, with a catch in it. "Now please *leave!*"

They left, with Cleo herding them out onto the porch. I heard them apologizing, and Cleo softened, and began to explain. That was a mistake.

A week later, while we were still drinking our coffee at the dinner-table, the doorbell rang. Cleo, expecting an answer to her recent wire to some South American clinic, left the table, went to answer it, and promptly screamed.

I dropped my cup with a crash and ran to the living room with a butcher knife, then stopped dead still.

It stood there in the doorway with a stunned expression on its face, gaping at Cleo who had collapsed in a chair. It wore a silver uniform with jack-boots, black-and-red cape, and a weird helmet with antenna protruding from it. It had a lantern jaw and a big, meaty, benign countenance.

"I'm awfully sorry," it boomed in a gentle deep-rich voice. "We just drove over from the studio, and I didn't take time to change . . ."

"Ulk!" said Cleo.

I heard footsteps at the head of the stairs behind me, then a howl from Kenny who had been getting ready for bed, after being helped upstairs.

"*Captain Chronos!*"

Bare feet machine-gunned down the stairs and came to a stop at a respectful distance from the idol.

"ggaaaaAA*AWWWSSSShhhh!*" Kenny timidly walked halfway around him, looking him up and down. "Geee . . . Gaaawwssshh!"

Cleo fanned herself with a newspaper and recovered slowly. I tossed the butcher-knife on a magazine stand and mumbled something apologetic. There were two of them: Chronos and the producer, a small suave man in a

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business suit. The latter drew me aside to explain. It developed that the photographers had explained to the boss, who had explained to the client, who had mentioned it to the agency, who had returned the fan letter to the producer with a note. It would appear that Captain Chronos, for the sake of nutritious and delicious Fluffy Crunkles, made it his habit to comfort the afflicted, the crippled, and the dying, if it were convenient and seemed somehow advantageous. He also visited the children's wards of hospitals, it seemed.

"This on the level, or for publicity?"

"On the level."

"Where's the photographer?"

The producer reddened and muttered noncommittally. I went to the door and looked out through the screen. There was another man in their car. When I pushed the screen open, it hit something hard — a tape recorder. I turned:

"Get out."

"But Mr. Westmore. . . ."

"Get *out!*"

They left quickly. Kenny was furious, and he kept on being furious all through the following day. At me. Cleo began agreeing with him to some extent, and I felt like a heel.

"You want Kenny to get the full treatment?" I grumbled. "You want him to wind up a sob-story child?"

"Certainly not, but it was cruel, Rod. The boy never had a happier moment until you . . ."

"All right, so I'm a bastard. I'm sorry."

That night Abe Sanders (Captain Chronos) came back alone, in slacks and a sport shirt, and muttering apologies. It developed that the Wednesday evening shows always had a children's panel (Junior Guardsmen) program, and that while they understood that Kenny couldn't come, they had wanted to have him with the panel, in absentia, by telephone.

"Please, Dad, can't I?"

The answer had to be no . . . but Kenny had been glaring at me furiously all day, and it was a way to make him stop hating me . . . still, the answer had to be no . . . the publicity . . . but he'd be delighted, and he could stop hating my guts for kicking them out . . .

"I guess so, if the offer's still open."

"*Dad!*"

The offer was still open. Kenny was to be on the show. They rehearsed him a little, and let him practice with the tape recorder until he got used to his voice.

On Wednesday evening, Kenny sat in the hall doorway to the living room, telephone in his lap, and stared across at Sanders' face on the television screen. Sanders held another phone, and we heard

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both their voices from the set. Occasionally the camera dollied in to a close shot of Sanders' chuckle, or panned along the table to show the juvenile panel members, kids between eight and sixteen. There was an empty chair on Sanders' right, and it bore a placard. The placard said "KENNY WESTLER."

It lasted maybe a minute. Sanders promised not to mention Kenny's address, nor to mention the nature of his illness. He did neither, but the tone of conversation made it clear that Kenny was in bad shape and probably not long for this world. Kenny had stage fright, his voice trembled, and he blurted something about the search for a cure. Cleo stared at the boy instead of the set, and my own glance darted back and forth. The cameraman panned to the empty chair and dollied in slowly so that the placard came to fill the screen while Kenny spoke. Kenny talked about stamp collections and time machines and autographs, while an invisible audience gaped at pathos.

"If anybody's got stamps to trade, just let me know," he said. "And autographs . . ."

I winced, but Sanders cut in. "Well, Kenny — we're not supposed to mention your address, but if any of you Guardsmen out there want to help Kenny out with his stamp collection, you can write to me and I'll definitely see that he gets the letters."

"And autographs too," Kenny added.

When it was over, Kenny had lived . . . but *lived.*

And then the mail came in a deluge, forwarded from the network's studio. Bushels of stamps, dozens of autograph books, Bibles, money, advice, crank letters, and maudlin gushes of sugary sympathy . . . and a few sensible and friendly letters. Kenny was delighted.

"Gee, Dad, I'll never get all the stamps sorted out. And look! — an autograph of Calvin Coolidge! . . ."

But it never turned him aside from his path of confident but mysterious purpose. He spent even more time in his room, in the garage, and — when he could muster the energy — back in the maple woods, doing mysterious things alone.

"Have they found a cure yet, Dad?" he asked me pleasantly when an expected letter came.

"They're . . . making progress," I answered lamely.

He shrugged. "They will . . . eventually." Unconcerned.

It occurred to me that some sort of psychic change, unfathomable, might have happened within him — some sudden sense of timelessness, of identity with the race. Something that would let him die calmly as long as he knew there'd

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be a cure *some*day. It seemed too much to expect of a child, but I mentioned the notion to Jules when I saw him again.

"Could be," he admitted. "It might fit in with this secrecy business."

"How's that?"

"People who know they're dying often behave that way. Little secret activities that don't become apparent until after they're gone. Set up causes that won't have effects until afterwards. Immortality cravings. You want to have posthumous influence, to live after you. A suicide note is one perversion of it. The suicide figures the world will posthumously feel guilty, if he tells it off."

"And Kenny . . . ?"

"I don't know, Rod. The craving for immortality is basically procreative, I think. You have children, and train them, and see your own mirrored patterns live on in them, and feel satisfied, when your time comes. Or else you sublimate it, and do the same thing for all humanity — through art, or science. I've seen a lot of death, Rod, and I believe there's more than just-plain-selfishness to people's immortality-wishes; it's associated with the human reproductive syndrome — which includes the passing on of culture to the young. But Kenny's just a kid. I don't know."

Despite Kenny's increasing helplessness and weakness, he began spending more time wandering out in the woods. Cleo chided him for it, and tried to limit his excursions. She drove him to town on alternate days for a transfusion and shots, and she tried to keep him in the house most of the time, but he needed sun and air and exercise, and it was impossible to keep him on the lawn. Whatever he was doing, it was a shadowy secretive business. It involved spades and garden tools and packages, with late excursions into the maples toward the creek.

"You'll know in four or five months," he told me, in answer to a question. "Don't ask me now. You'd laugh."

But it became apparent that he wouldn't last that long. The rate of transfusions doubled, and on his bad days, he was unable to get out of bed. He fainted down by the creek, and had to be carried back to the house. Cleo forbade him to go outside alone without Jules' day to day approval, and Jules was beginning to be doubtful about the boy's activities.

When restricted, Kenny became frantic. "I've got to go outside, Dad, *please!* I can't finish it if I don't. I've got to! How else can I make contact with them?"

"Contact? With whom?"

But he clammed up, and refused to discuss anything about the matter. That night I awoke at two a.m. Something had made a sound. I stole out of bed without

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disturbing Cleo and went to prowl about the house. A glance down the stairway told me that no lights burned on the first floor. I went to Kenny's room and gingerly opened the door. Blackness.

"Kenny —?"

No sound of breathing in the room. Quietly I struck a match.

The bed was empty.

"*Kenny!*" I bellowed it down the hall, and then I heard sounds — Cleo stirring to wakefulness and groping for clothes in our bedroom. I trotted downstairs and turned on lights as I charged from room to room.

He was not in the house. I found the back screen unlatched and went out to play a flashlight slowly over the backyard. There . . . by the hedge . . . caught in the cone of light . . . Kenny, crumpled over a garden spade.

Upstairs, Cleo screamed through the back window. I ran out to gather him up in my arms. Skin clammy, breathing shallow, pulse irregular — he muttered peculiarly as I carried him back to the house.

"Glad you found it . . . knew you'd find it . . . got me to the right time . . . when are we . . . ?"

I got him inside and up to his room. When I laid him on the bed, a crudely drawn map, like a treasure map, with an "X" and a set of bearings, fell from his pocket. I paused a moment to study it. The "X" was down by the fork in the creek. What had he buried there?

I heard Cleo coming up the stairs with a glass of hot milk, and I returned the map to Kenny's pocket and went to call the doctor.

When Kenny awoke, he looked around the room very carefully — and seemed disappointed by what he saw.

"Expecting to wake up somewhere else?" I asked.

"I guess it was a dream," he mumbled. "I thought they came early."

"Who came early?"

But he clammed up again. "You'll find out in about four months," was all he'd say.

He wouldn't last that long. The next day, Doc Jules ordered him to stay inside, preferably sitting or lying down most of the time. We were to carry him outside once a day for a little sun, but he had to sit in a lawn chair and not run around. Transfusions became more frequent, and finally there was talk of moving him to the hospital.

"I won't go to the hospital."

"You'll have to, Kenny. I'm sorry."

That night, Kenny slipped outside again. He had been lying quietly all day, sleeping most of the time, as if saving up energy for a last spurt.

Shortly after midnight, I awoke

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to hear him tiptoe down the hall. I let him get downstairs and into the kitchen before I stole out of bed and went to the head of the stairs.

"Kenny!" I shouted. "Come back up here! Right now!"

There was a brief silence. Then he bolted. The screen door slammed, and bare feet trotted down the back steps.

"*Kenny!*"

I darted to the rear window, overlooking the backyard.

"*Kenny!*"

Brush whipped as he dove through the hedge. Cleo came to the window beside me, and began calling after him.

Swearing softly, I tugged my trousers over my pajamas, slipped into shoes, and hurried downstairs to give chase. But he had taken my flashlight.

Outside, beneath a dim cloud-threatened moon, I stood at the hedge, staring out across the meadow toward the woods. The night was full of crickets and rustlings in the grass. I saw no sign of him.

"*Kenny!*"

He answered me faintly from the distance. "Don't try to follow me, Dad. I'm going where they can cure me."

I vaulted the fence and trotted across the meadow toward the woods. At the stone fence, I paused to listen — but there were only crickets. Maybe he'd seen me coming in the moonlight, and had headed back toward the creek.

The brush was thick in places, and without a light, it was hard to find the paths. I tried watching for the gleam of the flashlight through the trees, but saw nothing. He was keeping its use to a minimum. After ten minutes of wandering, I found myself back at the fence, having taken a wrong turning somewhere. I heard Cleo calling me from the house.

"Go call the police! They'll help find him!" I shouted to her.

Then I went to resume the search. Remembering the map, and the "X" by the fork in the creek, I trotted along the edge of the pasture next to the woods until I came to a dry wash that I knew led back to the creek. It was the long way around, but it was easy to follow the wash; and after a few minutes I stumbled onto the bank of the narrow stream. Then I waded upstream toward the fork. After twenty yards, I saw the flashlight's gleam — and heard the crunch of the shovel in moist ground. I moved as quietly as I could. The crunching stopped.

Then I saw him. He had dropped the shovel and was tugging something out of the hole. I let him get it out before I called . . .

"Kenny . . ."

He froze, then came up very slowly to a crouch, ready to flee.

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He turned out the flashlight.

"Kenny, don't run away from me again. Stay there. I'm not angry."

No answer.

"Kenny!"

He called back then, with a quaver in his voice. "Stay where you are, Dad — and let me finish. Then I'll go with you. If you come any closer, I'll run." He flashed the light toward me, saw that I was a good twenty yards away. "Stay there now . . ."

"Then will you come back to the house?"

"I won't run, if you stay right there."

"Okay," I agreed, "but don't take long. Cleo's frantic."

He set the light on a rock, kept it aimed at me, and worked by its aura. The light blinded me, and I could only guess what he might be doing. He pried something open, and then there was the sound of writing on tin. Then he hammered something closed, replaced it in the hole, and began shovelling dirt over it. Five minutes later, he was finished.

The light went out.

"Kenny . . . ?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't *want* to lie . . . I *had* to."

I heard him slipping quickly away through the brush — back toward the pasture. I hurried to the fork and climbed up out of the knee-deep water, pausing to strike a match. Something gleamed in the grass; I picked it up. Cleo's kitchen clock, always a few minutes slow. What had he wanted with the clock?

By the time I tore through the brush and found the path, there was no sound to indicate which way he had gone. I walked gloomily back toward the house, half-heartedly calling to Kenny . . . then . . . a flash of light in the trees?

BRRUUMMKP!

A sharp report, like a close crash of thunder! It came from the direction of the meadow, or the house. I trotted ahead, ignoring the sharp whipping of the brush.

"Kenny Vestmore? . . . Kenny . . . ?"

A strange voice, a foreign voice — calling to Kenny up ahead in the distance. The police, I thought.

Then I came to the stone fence . . . and froze, staring at the thing — or perhaps at the *no*thing — in the meadow.

It was black. It was bigger than a double garage, and round. I stared at it, and realized that it was not an object but an opening.

And someone else was calling to Kenny. A rich, pleasant voice — somehow it reminded me of Doctor Jules, but it had a strong accent, perhaps Austrian or German.

"Come on along here, liddle boy. Ve fix you op."

Then I saw Kenny, crawling

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on toward it through the grass.

"Kenny, *don't*"

He got to his feet and stumbled on into the distorted space. It seemed to squeeze him into a grotesque house-of-mirrors shape; then it spun him inward. Gone.

I was still running toward the black thing when it began to shrink.

"Come along, liddle fellow, come mit oss. Ve fix."

And then the black thing belched away into nothingness with an explosive blast that knocked me spinning. I must have been out cold for awhile. The sheriff woke me.

Kenny was gone. We never saw him again. Cleo confirmed what I had seen on the meadow, but without a body, Kenny remains listed as missing.

Missing from this century.

I went back to the fork in the creek and dug up the breadbox he had buried. It contained his stamp collection and a packet of famous autographs. There was a letter from Kenny, too, addressed to the future, and it was his will.

> "Whoever finds this, please sell these things and use the money to pay for a time machine, so you can come and get me, because I'm going to die if you don't . . ."

I paused to remember . . . *I don't think the bank'd wait a hundred years.*

But Dad, don't you see? What difference does time make, if you're working on a time machine?

There was more to the note, but the gist of it was that Kenny had made an act of faith, faith in tomorrow. He had buried it, and then he had gone back to dig it up and change the rendezvous time from four months away to the night of his disappearance. He knew that he wouldn't have lived that long.

I put it all back in the box, and sealed the box with solder and set it in concrete at the foot of a six-foot hole. With this manuscript.

(To a reader, yet unborn, who finds this account in a dusty and ancient magazine stack: *dig.* Dig at a point 987 feet southeasterly on a heading of 149° from the northwest corner of the Hayes and Higgins Tract, as recorded in Map Book 6, p 78, Cleve County records. But not unless the world is ready to buy a time machine and come for Kenny, who financed it; come, if you can cure him. He had faith in *you.*)

Kenny is gone, and today there is a feeling of death in my house. But after a century of tomorrows? He invested in them, and he called out to them, pleading with the voice of a child. And tomorrow answered:

"Come, liddle boy. Ve fix."

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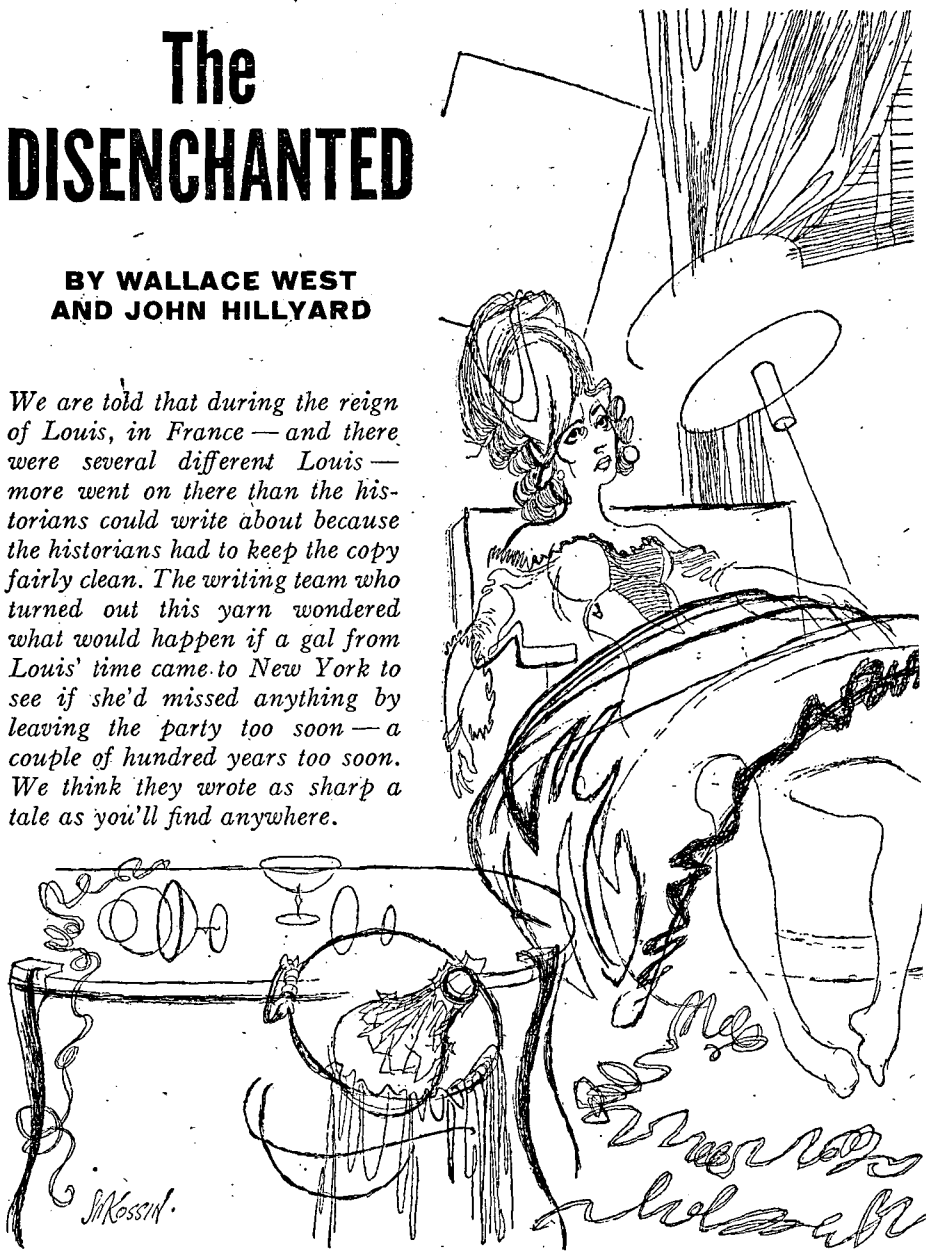
The DISENCHANTED

BY WALLACE WEST AND JOHN HILLYARD

We are told that during the reign of Louis, in France — and there were several different Louis — more went on there than the historians could write about because the historians had to keep the copy fairly clean. The writing team who turned out this yarn wondered what would happen if a gal from Louis' time came to New York to see if she'd missed anything by leaving the party too soon — a couple of hundred years too soon. We think they wrote as sharp a tale as you'll find anywhere.



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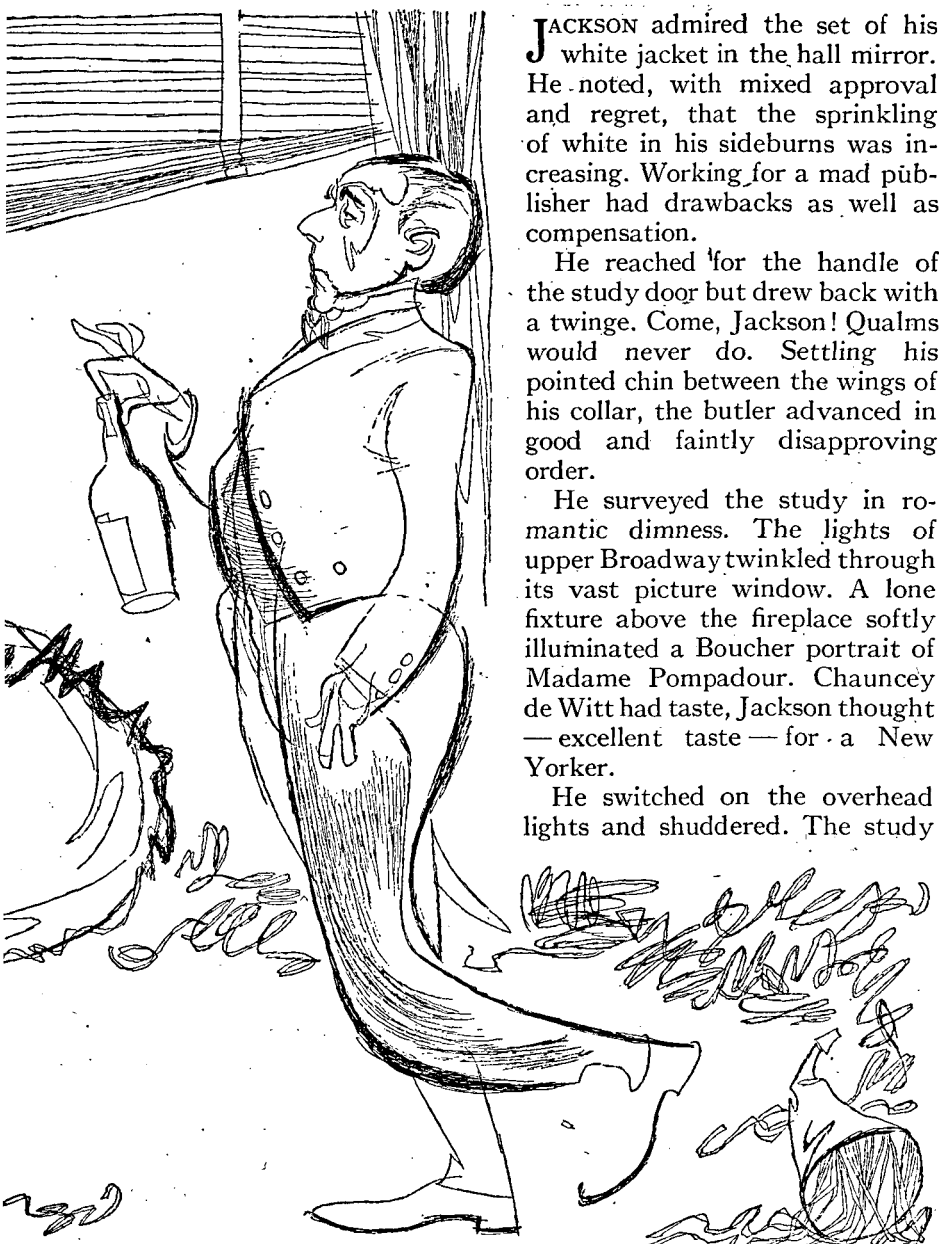

JACKSON admired the set of his white jacket in the hall mirror. He noted, with mixed approval and regret, that the sprinkling of white in his sideburns was increasing. Working for a mad publisher had drawbacks as well as compensation.

He reached for the handle of the study door but drew back with a twinge. Come, Jackson! Qualms would never do. Settling his pointed chin between the wings of his collar, the butler advanced in good and faintly disapproving order.

He surveyed the study in romantic dimness. The lights of upper Broadway twinkled through its vast picture window. A lone fixture above the fireplace softly illuminated a Boucher portrait of Madame Pompadour. Chauncey de Witt had taste, Jackson thought — excellent taste — for a New Yorker.

He switched on the overhead lights and shuddered. The study

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was, of course, a shambles. He turned instinctively toward the Chickering. On its shining top reposed the inevitable Martini glass.

He wiped away the ring and pivoted in search of smouldering cigarette butts. The other pieces of furniture seemed undamaged. The overstuffed chairs had been dragged across the floor he had so carefully polished. They were lined up, two by two, facing the window like animals ready to enter the Ark. He would rearrange them presently. But first . . . He stepped about primly, collecting half-empty glasses and other party debris. Once he found a full glass and salvaged its contents. After that he hummed appropriate snatches from "Buttons and Bows."

"What time is it, Jackson?" Disturbed by the glaring lights, an apparition had risen from one of the high-backed chairs facing the picture window. It yawned, stretched, burped and touched its head gingerly.

"Ten-twenty, Mr. De Witt." The butler carried on with increased briskness.

"Only ten-twenty? Did the liquor run out?"

"Oh no, sir." Jackson righted a toppled magazine rack. "But Miss Farrington did, sir. Out like a light."

"That's no disgrace. So did I. Oh — where is Miss Farrington now?" Chauncey navigated himself around the chair and stood blinking. A pity, thought the butler. Seen at his best, the publisher was truly distinguished . . . prematurely white hair, a smile that made authors want to roll on the floor, just the slightest touch of business man's paunch. Forty-five-ish. But now! Tut! No disloyalty, he told himself. Aloud he said:

"She's in the bathroom, I believe, sir. At least I've been hearing . . ."

"That will do, Jackson!"

"Yes sir." The butler departed hastily with a tray full of glasses. Chauncey collapsed on the divan and tested his knee reflexes until the factotum returned.

"Where's Williams," he asked then.

"He'll be back soon. He had to take Mrs. Morris home. She was quite — ah, unsober, sir. Insisted that your publicity director was the only person at the party who could keep her from getting publicity, in that condition. Made quite a scene about it."

"The old witch! Taxi-riding with Williams again. That must be where she gets her teen-age love backgrounds. But she sells, damn it. She sells!" He studied the slight tremor in his cigarette-stained fingers for a moment. "Jackson —?"

"Yes, Mr. De Witt?" The butler stopped enroute to straighten

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out those suggestive chairs.

"Do you honestly think these things pay off?"

"Things, sir?"

"Oh come off it. You've seen at least 20 author-meets-the-critics bats up here. Are they worth the wear and tear?"

"I should think so, sir . . . if only because they, ah, feed the egos of all concerned."

"Um. And if you were one of the critics invited, you'd dash right out and write a rave notice afterward?"

"That, sir, would depend on when I dashed, I'm afraid."

"Meaning?"

"Well, take tonight. Miss Farrington was superb in that topless evening gown with the sequins. Her accent worked like butter . . ."

"Ah! You fell, too!" Chauncey expanded.

"I was going on to say, sir," the butler mopped at the sticky top of a side table, "that Miss Farrington was superb — up to her fifth cocktail. That's when Sterling North left. I'd say the Tely will be all right tomorrow. The trouble is that most of the critics stayed longer."

"What happened? I got a bit hazy around then."

"I hate to cast aspersions, sir, particularly when you are so fond of Miss Farrington. But five is the lady's limit. It would seem she has had little experience in, shall we say, the fleshpots."

"She actually hasn't, you know." Chauncey managed to fish out a cigarette which Jackson saved him the embarrassment of trying to light.

"That's what I gathered, sir. Nevertheless, having read the lady's book, one would think —"

"Fiction, my dear Jackson, pure fiction! But built on a solid foundation of historical fact, you understand."

"Of course. Yet the episodes of her book seem so vivid. As if they had been lived. That scene with the Duke de Choiseul in the boudoir of Madame de Pompadour . . ."

"That is a stopper, isn't it?" Chauncey was beginning to return to life.

"Oh yes sir. That scene! The suspense. The excitement. You could feel it in your, ah, bones. Lust, sir!"

"Jackson!" Chauncey threw up both hands in mock horror.

"Sorry, sir. It was there! In such glowing detail that . . . Tell me, Mr. De Witt. Can Frenchmen actually do things that way? I would be inclined to think that . . ."

"Remember your position, Jackson!"

"Oh, I never forget *that*, sir." He started cleaning the ashtrays. "And that scene in the forest, after the hunt, when Pompy first meets the king. You remember: Their carriages lock wheels and

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are overturned. And then . . . Oh, sir, Louis must have been quite a king!"

"Well, for my money," Chauncey was up now and pacing the cluttered room, "the best chapter is the one in which Pompy comes to the palace for the first time and challenges Louis' mistress to prove which of them is the, shall we say, better woman."

"Quite right, sir. I couldn't get to sleep the night after I read that. And the magnums of champagne those three drank out of slippers." The butler sighed and his narrow shoulders slumped. "And then to see Miss Farrington after her sixth. It was a shock, sir, I can assure you."

"Disillusion is always a shock, Jackson. You'll get over it. Meanwhile, bring me a drink. This quiet is ruining my nerves. And leave the door open. Some dame must have been using musk. I abominate the stuff."

As the butler catfooted out, Chauncey struck a pose in front of the fireplace and stared moodily at Pompadour's portrait.

"Well, Pompy," he said, "at least you can't be disillusioned by the doings of Miss Fern Farrington, either in print or in the flesh. And *what* flesh, six cocktails notwithstanding! You'll lose no sleep, Madame, because of the filth I'm publishing about you next week. Thank the stars you're dead, woman, and gone to play dainty shepherdesses in some heavenly theater. You're not forced to be a literary pimp in order to pay last year's income tax. Pompy, I envy you. I sincerely do. And I take this *tete-a-tete* as an occasion to apologize for the grievous wrong I am about to do your memory. We, who are about to lie, salute you." He bowed from the waist and immediately regretted the action.

"Those sentiments, Monsieur De Witt," said a soft contralto voice, "are the first decent ones I ever heard you express."

Chauncey spun around tipsily and gulped. A woman had risen from one of the chairs before the window where she had been concealed. She was approaching him slowly behind a solid barrier of that musky perfume.

The publisher shook his head savagely, closed his eyes, opened them and squinted to get in focus. The belated guest; she must be a holdover from the party, he told himself, although he could not remember having met her. She was wearing a heavy brocade crinoline in a raw electric blue that clashed with the room's warm pastel shades. Her pale eyes had crow's feet at their corners. Her face was made up crudely; dead white with blue-red circles on the cheekbones and no lipstick. Her head looked tiny as a doll's under a high, powdered wig bedecked

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with rumpled silk ribbons.

"My God, who are you?" he demanded.

"You don't recognize me?" asked that haunting voice.

"Can't say I do." He fished out a cigarette and had trouble with his lighter again. "Sorry. Perhaps if you'd refresh my memory . . . There's something familiar . . . But no." He shook his head, gently this time. "I'm afraid . . ."

"Monsieur, you have the honor to address Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson le Normant D'Etioles, la Marquise de Pompadour."

"Pleased to meet you." He did a slow take. "La Marquise de . . ." Suddenly he was yelling: "Jackson. Jackson. Quick!"

"Monsieur seems *etonée*," she smiled coldly.

"Yes. It's the pink elephant effect. I never seem to get used to it. Jackson! *A moi!*"

"Here you are sir." The butler returned, bearing two highballs. "And Madame!" He presented the tray with a low bow.

"Did you know she was here?"

"Not exactly, sir. But in this apartment —"

"*A votre sale sante*," said the woman, lifting her glass.

"*Prosit.*" Chauncey was fighting to regain his poise. "And I remember enough French to know that was a dirty crack." He drank. "Ah. That's better. Now let's start all over again. I'm afraid I didn't catch the name."

"The name is Pompadour," she snapped. "You may kiss my hand."

Just drunk enough to fall into the spirit of the thing, Chauncey knelt to kiss her long, cool fingers. "Charmed, I'm sure," he said, rising and taking another long drink. "And what brings you out of — er, retirement, Madame?"

"Defamations," she answered grimly. "Lies. Sly insinuations. Your Miss Farrington has *calomnie* the character of the First Lady of France!"

"Miss Farrington? Now who's defaming? Jackson, do you hear what I hear?"

"Am I supposed to, sir?"

"You certainly are. Now look here, Madame Whoever-You-Are," Chauncey glared down at his unwelcome guest, "I've had a hard day. I've been acting De Witt before a pack of literary wolves, as well as playing papa to a budding authoress. I'm in no mood for games. I've — in short, may I call you a taxi?"

"I have my own means of transportation, thank you." Was that a ghost of a smile on her pale but beautifully formed lips? "In the meantime, let us discuss the business, as you colonists so quaintly put it."

"Business? Then we need another drink. Jackson!"

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"Certainly sir. A sulphur cocktail, sir?" He faded out of the door.

"You were saying, Miss —?" the publisher began.

"Not Miss! Madame Pompadour, *maîtresse déclarée* to His Glorious Majesty, King Louis Quinze of France and —"

"Look here!" Chauncey was losing patience. "I don't know whether you're an escapee from the loony bin or whether this is a gag cooked up by Simon and Schuster. But go away now. I'm not laughing!"

"I am not here to make you laugh, Monsieur de Witt, but to demand my rights as a woman."

"Go talk to Dr. Kinsey, then. I have my hands full with Miss Farrington."

"That wench! She should be in the Bastille instead of in your bathroom."

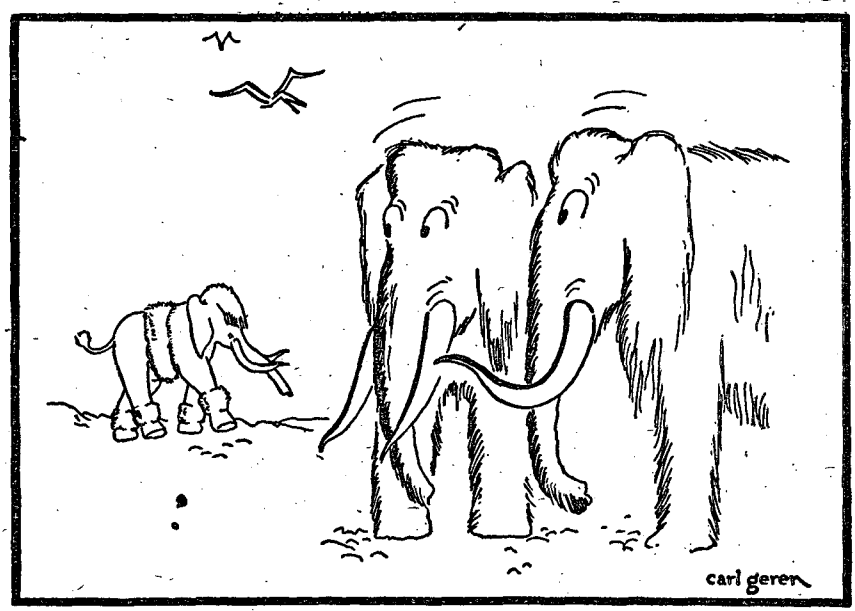
"Indeed!" He found himself shouting. "This begins to sound like a shakedown. Just what is your little game, Madame? What's the racket?"

"Game? Racket?" She lifted eyebrows.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"Justice, you insufferable *chou!*" she snarled right back.

"By God, that's an idea! Jackson!" As that long-suffering individual scampered in with drinks he commanded, "Please get



"A trifle daring, don't you think?"

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me the Department of Justice."

"The Department of —?" The butler's literal mind struggled with this concept as he headed for the telephone. "Justice. Very well, sir."

"You needn't bother, *garçon*," said the self-professed Pompadour. "It won't work."

"What won't work?" Chauncey goggled at her.

"That abomination called the telephone."

"Now, Madame," he soothed, "won't you sit down in this comfortable chair," he pushed one forward, "while we talk this matter over like old friends. I am sure there has been a misunderstanding, but in the meantime . . ."

"The lady is right," said Jackson, jiggling the hook. "It won't work, sir. The phone is dead."

"Now will you believe, Mr. De Witt?" She smiled quizzically.

"Because you cut my phone cord?" he began. Then his voice dripped honey. "Why certainly I believe . . . Jackson, use the phone in the lobby."

"That won't work, either," she murmured. "No telephone will work. My good friend, Alec Bell, has just uninvented the telephone."

"Alec Bell?" wailed Chauncey. "Great grief, I've had enough of this blither. Jackson, go down and get the cop on the corner."

"A policeman, sir? But . . ."

"You heard me. Tell him I want this dame thrown out."

"Yes sir." The butler slid out of the room, thoroughly disturbed.

"I knew, of course, that you were an unprincipled liar, *Monsieur*," said the visitor, finally seating herself, "but I had not expected you to prove yourself a stupid ass as well. Now, shall we get down to the business?"

"Too much business already. Funny business," moaned Chauncey, sitting down too and holding his head. "It *must* be Simon and Schuster."

"Your wit is so acute. So like dear Voltaire's."

"If you'd stop those historical allusions maybe you could get around to telling me why you really came here and what the hell you want."

"Historical delusions brought me here." She sipped the highball and swung a slim foot. "When you stop yelling I shall tell you what I want."

"All right, lady." He did his best to relax. "I submit."

"Naturally." She adjusted that outrageous wig before she continued: "*Bien*, *Monsieur*. I, la Marquise de Pompadour, have materialized to stop a present injustice and abominations to come. I speak in my own behalf and in that of a great number of illustrious people whom I have the honor to represent."

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"You talk like an agent . . . But why come to me?"

"Because of Miss Farrington's novel." Her eyes became glittering slits. "It is our wish that you stop publication."

"Fat chance," Chauncey mocked her. "It isn't every day that I have a best seller on my hands. *Pompy for Short* will outsell *Amber, Anthony Adverse* and *Gone with the Wind* put together."

"*Pompy for Short*" she spat. "Even when Louis was in his cups he daren't have called me by such a ridiculous name. Print that title and you'll curse the day you ever laid eyes on Fern Farrington and her, shall we say, mistresspiece?"

"Who's talkin' about po' li'l me?" quavered a plaintive voice behind them. "Did somebody remember po' li'l Fern?"

Chauncey twisted around in his chair, then clapped his hand to his forehead like the hero of one of the De Witt line of romantic novels. The girl who stood behind them was dressed in a pair of men's awning-striped pajamas which showed each of her blond curves to lavish advantage.

"For God's sake, Fern," he choked. "Where did you find that rig?"

"In youall's dressuh drawuh." She fluffed her short curls. "Spoiled mah dress. Too damn much vermouth in th' Manhattans." She sensed his disapproval. "Have to weah somethin', doan' I? It's cold up heah in th' No'th."

"Shameless hussy," the other woman sniffed. "To forget your hoops!"

"Haven't forgotten 'em." Fern hiccoughed shamelessly. "Who're youall?"

The intruder rose with regal grace.

"You recognize me now, n'est-ce pas?"

"If I were drunk," Fern answered judiciously, "I'd say youall were a moth-eaten copy of Madame Pompadour. Bein' cold sober, I don't know youall from a madam!"

"Pull yourself together, Fern. This lady says she *is* Pompadour and that you have traduced her." Chauncey was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Tsk!" The girl opened her blue eyes to their roundest. "I'd have thought that was more in *yoah* line." Those eyes filled with tears. "Or are youall makin' fun of po' li'l me?"

"I am la Pompadour." The other woman sat down after much adjusting of hoops. "Your maliciously slanderous book will remain unpublished."

"But it ain't malislanderous." Sniffle. " 'Snothin' but the truth. 'S historical. Like Stonewall Jackson." Suddenly Fern fired up. "Too damn disgustin' historical. An' where th' hell youall get that Pompadour stuff? Pompy died

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in, let's see, seventeen-six-hic-ty-four, 'cordin' to John the Walden."

"Every school child knows that!"

"Tha's where youall are wrong. Nobody knows it . . . 'till they read my book. Walden had to dig up th' dates in an ol' library."

"Who is this Walden?"

"He's Fern's researcher," Chauncey cut in.

"Nice ol' John," cooed the well-budded authoress. "Knows everythin' 'bout ol' Pompy. Gave po' li'l me th' stinkin' facts an' I made 'em sing . . . Chauncey, honey, how's about a drink fo' po' li'l . . ."

"Cocotte! You beslimed the facts for your own petty gains!"

"What youall mean, *petty?* With a first edition of half a million."

"Impudent wench!"

"Lissen to whoall's talkin' . . . A dressed-up wreck callin' herself Pompadour. Look at that face. Look at that wig . . . Look at that dress. Just *smell* her. Pfui!" Even as she raged Fern began to crumple. "Aw, get th' hell out!" she wailed. "I'm sick o' listenin' to your nonsense. Sick! My God, *how* I'm sick!" She threw herself on the sofa, weeping hysterically.

"Stop it," Chauncey commanded, bending over her. "Stop it, I say. You're tired. You're upset. It's been a tough day. I'll take care of this impostor. Go in and lie down and rest."

"An' leave youall alone with Pompy's ghost?" Fern gripped the upholstery. "After all, they did call her 'un morceau de roi'. John tol' me that meant 'a piece fit for a king.' Lemme be or I'll . . ."

A crisis was averted when the hall door burst open and a chunky little man in a loud vest charged into the study. He stopped dead as he took in the tableau and rolled the dead stump of a cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"More woman trouble, Chaunce?" he inquired politely.

"'Bout time you got here to help me out of this mess, Bob." The publisher stopped trying to sooth Fern by patting prominent parts of her anatomy. "*Live* women are bad enough."

"Got stuck with that Morris dame," explained his publicity man. "Is *she* a lush. Tried to reach you from I don't know how many phones. They either were out of order or the booth was full of some guy jiggling the hook."

"Out of order?" The publisher's eyes were wild.

"Yeah . . . What's the matter, boss? Did I say something I shouldn't?"

"Haven't you heard? Alexander Graham Bell uninvented the telephone."

"Huh?" Bob's thick eyebrows

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went up. "A gag? I don't get it."

"That's what the woman said." Chauncey pointed. "She said: 'It won't work. Alec Bell just uninvented the telephone.' "

"Looney, huh?" His employee appraised the woman in crinoline who sat smiling secretly, little foot swinging. "Who is she?"

"Says she's Madame Pompadour."

"And I suppose you want me to take *her* home," Bob groaned just as the door opened again to admit a dejected Jackson.

"Well?" Chauncey yelled at him. "Where's that cop?"

"I had not even a modicum of success, sir." The butler bowed his head.

"And why not? Didn't you tell him what was going on?"

"That was just the trouble, sir. I did tell him."

"Then what?"

"When I explained that my master wanted him to evict Madame Pompadour he just grunted. Most embarrassing, sir! When I persisted, he threatened to take me to what he called the hoosegow. It seemed he had read about Pompy in the eighth grade." With skill born of long experience Jackson ducked through the door in time to avoid the highball glass that Chauncey hurled at his greying head.

"I told you that every schoolboy knows about me," said the cause of all this turmoil. "You are mad to publish that book. It will be to laugh."

"You're Pompy?" Bob studied her, rolling his head and his cigar from side to side in unison. "And you don't want Fern's book published? Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, what a publicity stunt. We'll even get the jump on the Legion of Decency." His heavy face fell. "But we can't use it. It's necrophilism. The women's clubs would crack down on us."

"I'm sleepy, Bob," the publisher yawned. "And Fern has a crying jag on. Won't you get rid of *her?*"

"Come, ma'am," said the publicity man. "I'll run you home."

"It would serve you right if I allowed you to, Monsieur Bob. But I stay here. You conniving robbers must change the title of your book. You must re-write it. And you must make the Publishers' Association swear that, a la avenir, historical characters will be treated with honeur in books, plays, motion pictures, radio and the TV."

"Go on. Go on." Bob cried, dragging pencil and paper out of a breast pocket. "This is rich."

"Making me a strumpet," she stormed, "who hops from bed to bed like a cricket! I *never* had the enjoyment in bed. It was a chore. Louis called me his little sea gull."

"Why, that's just what John

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Walden said," Fern murmured. "But of course I couldn't use it. Imagine, Chauncey! Not having fun in bed. After all, though, Pompy's real name was Poisson. That means fish in French."

"Have you no shame, Fern?" sighed Chauncey.

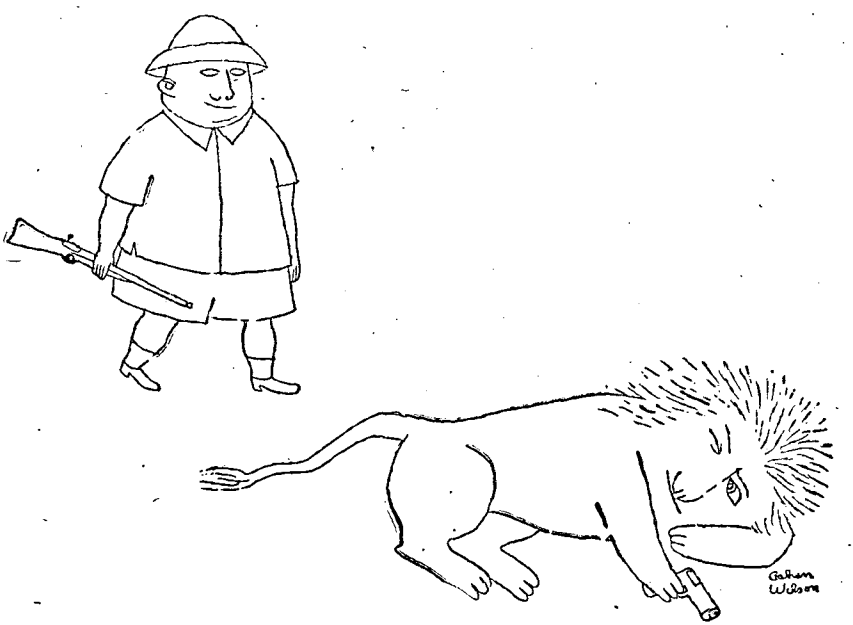
"Not when I'm in New York, honey." She eased her lissome body into a more seductive position and nestled her bright head among the cushions.

"And is there a word about my statesmanship in your pornographic portrayal?" the alleged Pompadour continued her harangue. "No! Not one! Was it pointed out that, if my plans to unite Austria and France against Frederick the Great had succeeded, Germany would have been crushed forever and Hitler never would have emerged to bedevil you moderns? No! Instead, she has me doing a strip, what you call it, tease, in my so lovely theater. Me, la Pompadour, who played demure shepherdesses but always. Bah!"

"Baaaah!" echoed Fern.

"You throw a good line, Madame." Chauncey was at the end of his patience. "But I stand to make a pile of dough on 'Pompy'. Even if you *were* she, I wouldn't change a word in the book. Now what are you going to do? Sue me?"

"More than that," she answered



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imperturbably. "I shall haunt you."

"There's an angle we *can* use," Bob yelped as he shredded the last of his cigar. "Quote: Prominent Publisher Haunted by Ghost of Pompadour. Unquote. With pix! But we'll have to get some decent clothes on you, old girl. Those rags must hail from Cain's theatrical warehouse. And how about a short course at the Du Barry Success School?"

"Du Barry! That creature!" He flinched at the words as though she had raked his face with her fingernails.

"Tout le monde who have been lied about by literary ghouls shall haunt you," she raced on. "Poor little Lucrezia Borgia, who never poisoned even a mouse; who asked only that her lovely hair be shampooed once a week. Nell Gwynn — Cleopatra — Napoleon. All are up in arms. This folie must end. History, it is becoming a sideshow for freaks."

"For God's sake get this madwoman out of here," Chauncey pleaded.

"Gee, boss, she's going good." Bob saw despair in the publisher's eyes and relented. "All right." He gripped her arm. "Come along, my good woman. This has gone far enough."

She shook him off. Drawing herself to her full height, she stared out of the window into far distances. A quivering metallic tone, such as heralds the supernatural on radio and TV, rose and was sustained in the room.

"What do I do now, Ben?" she cried. "They have me cornered, moi."

"A corner in spooks!" Fern marvelled from the divan.

"Quiet. Do not interrupt my friend Ben Franklin." A smile crossed that clownlike makeup. Then it became serious again. As the quivering sound died the woman turned haughtily to face her enemies. "Messieurs and, ah, madamoiselle?" she purred, "we have come to history's turning point. Henceforth truth alone shall prevail . . . in literature a moins."

"Atta baby!" Bob whispered, completely under her spell.

" 'And the truth shall make you free!' " she quoted.

"John, VIII, 32," exclaimed Bob, and received her smile like a rare gift.

"Admitting, for the sake of argument," said Chauncey, "that truth is better, as well as stranger than fiction, what can we do about it at this late date?"

"Start by withdrawing or changing that awful book."

"On the say of a loony who calls herself Madame Pompadour?"

"But I *am!*"

"Prove it," he challenged.

"I can tell you plenty of in-

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timate gossip about Versailles —"

"I made up a lot of that hooey, too," Fern sneered.

"I can show you my likness in the paintings of Boucher."

"You sure don't look like *that* Boucher." Bob pointed toward the fireplace.

"I can bring to my aid other great ones whom the likes of you have maligned."

"Swell." Fern stretched lazily, showing a stretch of creamy midriff. "Bring on your mildewed boy friends."

"Very well, if you insist." Their nemesis hesitated for the first name. "Let us start with . . . with that great American, Thomas Edison —"

"What's *he* bellyaching about?" grumbled Chauncey.

"About those movies, with their sentimentalism . . . those biographies, with their commercialism. Tom has suffered much. Now he will prove that I speak truth by uninventing the incandescent lamp!"

At her last word the study lights went out without even a preliminary flicker. For a moment longer those of Broadway shimmered up through the window. Then they faded, too.

"Jackson!" shouted the publisher. "Light some candles!"

They sat, then, in stunned silence, until the hall door opened with a crash. "Who's that?" Chauncey's voice shook. "Jackson or King Louis?"

"It's Walden," a voice replied. "And did I do plenty of research locating your apartment in this blackout. What's up?"

"Plenty!" Bob lit a cigar and puffed it until it illuminated his scared, pudgy face. "Madame Pompadour is up and haunting us for libel."

"Can't say I blame her after what Fern did with the facts I gave her."

"We're not kidding, John," Chauncey said as Jackson entered with a tray of candles. "We have a loose screw in our midst. She — there she is by the window — she insists she's Pompadour. Wants us to stop publication. Maybe you can make her understand that *you're* Pompadour."

The candles were distributed now, two on the piano and two on the mantel. They revealed the intruder standing serenely beneath the Boucher. Their soft light was just made for the garishness of her makeup. Instead of an ageing, rumpled masquerader, she had taken on the look of youth and cool authority. Fern buried her head in the cushions and howled in helpless fury.

"Well, Monsieur Walden?" The creature looked serenely at the pale, stooped young man who had just entered.

He paced slowly forward, as though bewitched.

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"That dimple," he husked. "The poise of her head. Those hands. That mocking smile — Of course I've gone crazy — but —" He dropped to one knee and kissed her hand reverently. "Madame, your humble servant!"

"My God," Chauncey breathed. "She's beautiful in this light!"

"Beautiful!" Fern bounced off the couch. "Beautiful? That animated bag of graveyard bones? That — that muskox? You dopes can stand around with your jaws hanging down but I won't let her get away with that tripe." Fighting drunk, she crept toward the other woman. "Get out of here this instant, you bitch, before I scratch your bleary eyes out. These men are mine!"

"Oh la, la." Pompadour stood her ground. "Polyandrous, too, Mme. Farrington? And you have perdu your southern accent somewhere."

"Why you — you —"

"Oui. Moi! When I to Versailles came, numerous felines prowled the palace. They did not stay."

"Doan' youall go insultin' po' li'l me. Th' Farringtons o' Virginia —"

"Relax, Fern," John cut her off. "Can't you understand —"

"I can understand there's mayhem to be done. One side!" Fern sprang, long fingernails clawed.

Two steps and she struck a wall. Straining forward from lithe hips, she scrabbled at invisibility.

"Devil!" The fight drained out of her. "Hex!" She dashed for the bedroom in a storm of hysterics.

"What did you do to her?" Chauncey was intrigued. "I'd like to learn that trick."

"*Nous avons de*, what you call, resources." Pompy arranged her hoops and sat down. "Another drink *s'il vous plait*. Je suis un . . . I am a bit *fatigué*."

"Allow me to bring it, Madame." Gallant John followed Jackson from the room.

"You spoke of resources, ma'am," Bob eased forward in a cloud of smoke. "That's what bothers me. You've got too many of them for an authentic eighteenth century spook. You're a time traveller, past tense, aren't you?"

"I don't believe I understand!" Those long hands flew to her throat.

"Oh yes you do," he persisted. "You arrive at the psychological moment, when we're all a bit off-center. You spot Fern's phony accent after we had sweated blood for six months to make it sound right and had fooled every critic in town. You understand telephones and electric lights. Even I know that Pompadour died hundreds of years ago."

"Hundred and ninety, come next April," John amended as he returned with drinks.

"All right. All right. What

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I'm driving at is that Franklin was 'way ahead of his time. He *could* have invented a time machine, I'll bet. Besides, folks don't crawl out of graves."

"Who said anything about graves?" Pompy's laughter tinkled like brook water. "Of course small souls do die and that's an end of them. In fact, many people die years and years before they are buried. You, Monsieur Bob, stand in grave danger of that if you remain a press agent, despite your refreshing knowledge of the Scriptures. But great souls never die."

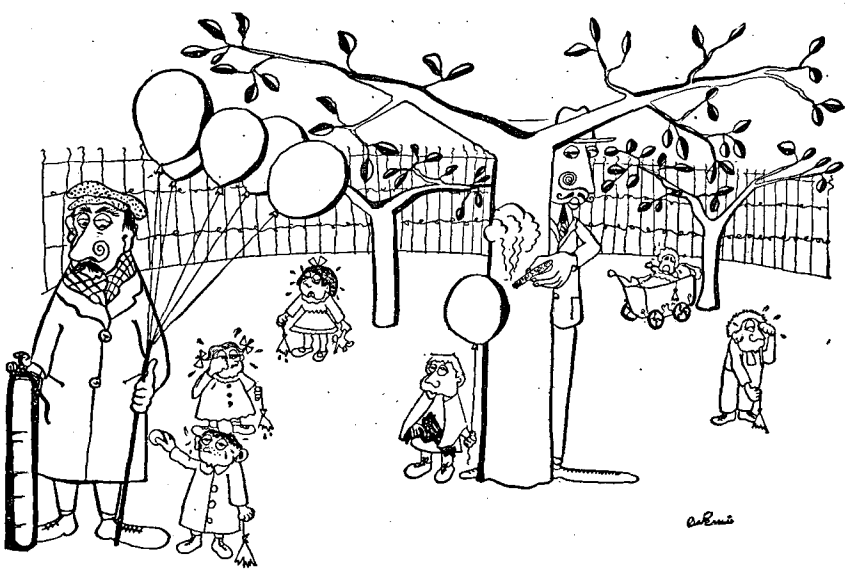
"You do fancy yourself, don't you?" Chauncey managed a grin.

"What does death mean to souls like mine, and Franklin's and Shakespeare's? Poof! Nothing! We go on. We learn. If we have been wicked we suffer. My friend Kit summed it all up by having Mephisto say: 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it' when he visited the earth."

"And do *you* suffer, Madame?" John asked.

"*Mon Dieu, non!* Whatever made you think . . . ? Oh, because I was *maîtresse* to a king? But I made him happy, poor thing." She stared at the candle flame for long moments, lost in thought, before adding softly: "I've always wondered whatever became of poor, sad, floundering Louis."

"You stinker, Walden!" Chauncey exploded. "She's talk-



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ing your brand of theosophical mumbo-jumbo. You put her up to this!"

"I wish I had, old fellow," answered the researcher, "but she thought it up all by herself. I did three years of research on Pompadour, so I should know her when I see her."

"*Merci, mon ami.*" Pompy curtsied to him. "One person here has the soul. And now . . ." She sat again and folded her hands primly, ". . . about the book . . ."

"No!" Chauncey pleaded. "This has been fun, in a back-handed way, but I refuse to be coerced, even if you are a genuine, eighteen-karat ghost. The show must go on. Our clamoring public must be fed with dreams, even though the heavens fall."

"I'm not much good at making heavens fall," she said brightly, "but, if you insist . . ."

"Nuts," said Chauncey.

"She did jinx the phones, boss," warned Bob.

"And don't forget the lights." This from John.

"Crazy coincidences. They'll go on any minute now." As Pompy chuckled he added fiercely. "What the hell are you snickering about?"

"Monsier is upset?" She winked at him over her glass. "Un peu . . . ? Non?"

"Of course I'm upset. I have a splitting headache . . ."

"And a split personality, n'est-ce pas?"

"But your shenanigans have nothing to do with it. If you'll all clear out of here and let me have some peace, then maybe . . . Tomorrow . . ."

"This is the time for decision!" Her voice tolled like a bell.

"You are crazy. You are hopped up. If you don't beat it right now, I'll have you arrested." He was on the verge of following Fern into hysteria.

"Hold on, boss." Bob grabbed the publisher's arm. "What if there is something to it? If the phones and lights conked out . . ."

"And you a press agent!" fumed the other. "Can't you see how phony the whole thing is? Let's say those old snorts did want to supress 'Pompy for Short'. Why, then, get Bell and Edison to uninvent things? Why don't they go to the person most directly involved? Why don't they get old man Gutenberg to uninvent printing?"

"We thought of that," said Pompy.

"You what?"

"Ben had the same idea."

"That makes *me* a great soul, too, I suppose. Well . . . ?"

"Gutenberg . . ." She shook her wig sadly, ". . . wouldn't hear of it."

"Naturally," John chimed in. "If you knew Gutenberg . . ."

"A very religious soul," she agreed. "If he uninvented printing, there wouldn't be any Bibles.

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He refused to upset the world's belief."

"Nice of the old boy," Chauncey sniffed.

"Very. As Samuel Pepys says . . ."

"'And so to bed'", the publisher exploded. "That's your exit line, Madame. Scram!" He jumped to his feet, held out his hands.

"Un moment, *s'il vous plait!*" She bent her ungainly wig. A rapt look came over her face and then a smile as the quivering tone rose and fell.

"It's long distance." Bob tossed off his drink.

"*Oui?*" said Pompy to someone unseen. "You are? He has? . . . He will? . . . Magnifique! . . . Adieu."

"That was quick," grinned the press agent. "Rates must be high. What'd he say?"

"*Voici* my ultimatum." She rose, every inch a king's mistress. "Withdraw or rewrite that book. Refuse and I play another card . . . one that will trump all of your aces."

"They play bridge!" Bob sounded awed for the first time.

"Mr. Merganthaler has just agreed to uninvent his linotype." She paused for effect.

"Is *that* all?" Chauncey roared with nervous laughter.

"Holy cats, boss! Don't you get it?" Bob whooped. "If the linotypes go out there won't be a line in the papers tomorrow about Fern's party."

"There won't be any papers," John added in a low, shocked whisper.

"Do proceed." Their torturer was in her element.

"There won't be any 'Pompy'", Bob raved. "The De Witt Press will be stuck with half a million bound volumes full of blank pages. My hat! There won't be any books at all if the thing is retroactive."

"I withdraw my remarks about the magnitude of your soul, Monseiur Bob." Pompy rose and set her wig at a rougish angle. "You are of the intelligence. But your boss, he is hopeless. And so, bonsoir, messieurs. After us, the deluge."

She tripped to the door, half opened it, and smiled back at them over her slim shoulder as the butler tumbled into the study, ear foremost.

"Stop her, Jackson," cried Chauncey, at last realizing the enormity of his predicament.

"Sorry, sir." Jackson swept the door wide and bowed deeply. "I also am a great soul . . . Your servant, Madame."

The publisher fished blindly in his vest pocket. He dragged out a white handkerchief. He waved it with both hands.

"Pompy," he implored. "I surrender. Pompy, come back!"

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AN AMAZING SHORT-SHORT

WISH IT AWAY

BY FRANK FREEMAN

Dr. Lenko was a psychiatrist and proud of it, but he did not think that made him an ashcan for anybody's old phobia.

I'M AFRAID I must ask you again," said Dr. Lenko, "to state as clearly as you can the nature of this disturbance. I do not fully grasp your problem. . . ."

Mervin Hinkley opened his lips to speak, but before any words came, he jerked his head around and with panic-streaked eyes searched the corner of the psychiatrist's comfortably furnished office. "Well," replied Mervin haltingly, "it's hard to describe. But I've got to get away from it, Dr. Lenko . . . I've got to get away from it."

Doctor Lenko leaned back in his brown leather chair and impatiently shuffled through a drift of papers. His search stopped when he picked out a small, folded letter. Turning again to Mervin, he spoke. "You tell me in this letter that you are plagued by an apparition of some sort. I should like to know more about it."

Mervin pushed his thin fingers through a scanty thatch of faded brown hair. "It's not an apparition! It's real! I see it every night at ten o'clock!" He leaned forward in his chair, his frantic gray eyes pleading with the doctor to accept this persuasion.

Dr. Lenko smiled. "Then what is it, Mr. Hinkley?"

Mervin came to his feet and shouted, "It's round, with scales on its face and it's got two big red eyes." He looked quickly about the room as though the description of his alleged nightly visitor might have called the thing into his presence. Then he sat down uneasily, staring at Dr. Lenko and vigorously rubbing his hands together.

"The solution to your case," said Dr. Lenko calmly, "is, I'm quite sure, relatively simple."

"What is the solution?"

"Wish it away, Mr. Hinkley.

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Illustrator: Augusto Marin

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Wish it away." Dr. Lenko lifted himself from his leather resting place and strode around the desk to stand before Mervin.

"Do you think it's that easy?" Mervin asked.

"It may not be easy, but it's a psychologically sound method of eliminating such annoying mental visitations. You must convince yourself that you do not believe in this thing, this round, scaly-faced creature with the red eyes. Tell it, mentally, to leave. Tell it to move on. Persuade yourself that you shall have nothing to do with it. In time it won't exist. It all depends upon the conscious power which you are able to apply to your will." Dr. Lenko sat down.

"Wish it away. Maybe it would work. Besides, how can you tell until you try it? Tonight. No harm in that. Give it a try."

Mervin's face flexed and curved as his mind turned over the doctor's suggestion, then he moved from the chair and walked to the door. Looking over his shoulder, he said, "I don't know what will happen, Dr. Lenko, but I'll do as you said. I'll . . . I'll wish it away from me."

"Good."

The door closed.

For Dr. Lenko, the evening was one of those long stacks of echoing hours that lead to an early bedtime as the easiest way out of the monotony of being awake. As he lay in bed, hazily meditating upon the virtues and drawbacks of peering into people's minds, the telephone on his bedstand jangled.

Greeted by a disinterested hello, the voice on the other end announced, excitedly, "Dr. Lenko, this is Mervin Hinkley. I had to call you. That thing. . . ."

Dr. Lenko looked at his watch and noted it was fifteen minutes past Hinkley's witching hour. "What about it?" He readied himself to deliver a psychiatric treatment by remote control.

"It worked," Mervin cackled. "I wished it away, Doctor. It's a quarter past ten and I haven't seen a sign of it. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Wonderful," yawned Dr. Lenko. "Call on me if you ever need me again, Mr. Hinkley." He ended a potentially long conversation by easing the phone onto its cradle. Then, as if to escape from the Mervin Hinkleys and their collective problems, he burrowed into the woolen covers and wooed sleep.

But sleep did not come. Instead, a stirring at the foot of the bed. Dr. Lenko opened his eyes. The thing was round, with scales on its face, and big red eyes.

Dr. Lenko said, "Whu-whu —"

The thing seemed apologetic. It said, "Mervin sent me. I hope it's all right."

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THE GOOD DOG

BY JEROME BIXBY

Mr. Bixby is an impeccant gentleman with a heart only slightly smaller than left field at Yankee Stadium. As a dedicated defender of the underdog, his stories carry a strong message of equality for all — even if he has to go to Hell to prove his point . . .

ONCE, long ago, the Devil built a bridge — in the twinkling of an eye a bridge of seasoned wood and greystone appeared over a stream in the center of a small village which shall here be nameless, for both village and bridge are gone, and what's past is past.

The Devil built the bridge with the proviso that the soul of the first being to pass over it should belong to him. To this the townspeople agreed — for they had a plan.

The poet Longfellow has recorded what followed:

"At length the bridge being all completed,
The Abbot, standing at its head,
Threw across it a loaf of bread,
Which a hungry dog sprang after,
And the rocks reechoed with the peals of laughter
To see the Devil thus defeated."

Longfellow does not go on to describe with what earth-shaking snarls the Devil greeted this strategem. Nor does he record the wails of the unoffending dog as the Devil pounced upon it ere it had even sniffed the bread which had lured it to its doom, and wrested its soul brutally from its galvanized body and disappeared Hellwards in a puff of rotten smoke. The bridge had been gotten, the Devil had been done, and that was enough for the townspeople, and evidently, for Longfellow as well.

But this seems rather an anthropocentric view to take of the matter. What of the *dog?*

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Some of you will object that animals have no souls. Let me assure you that they do. Regard if you will the faithful watchdog, the mother tiger defending her young, monkeys at their clever play, swallows in migration slowing for a cripple, the limpid eye of the fawn, the dog mourning at his master's grave or, *probatum est*, finding his way with mystic determination to his master's side across miles upon miles of unknown terrain; regard the mother bird feeding her young, the mating minuet of the peacock who in the East symbolizes immortality, the community spirit of an ant-city — regard all these, and tell me animals have no souls: and I will tell you that we had better define our terms.

But let's have no debate — the dog had a soul, and the Devil made off with it, albeit with exceeding lack of enthusiasm.

The dog's lineage is as uncertain as is certain the fact that it was a very good dog. It was frankly a mutt. At the time of its demise it was six years and odd months old; and never in its life had it bitten anyone, or bayed with sleep-destroying vigor in the early morning hours, or chewed or torn up any possession of the villagers', or stolen one particle of food. It was known as a friendly dog: mothers had trusted it to romp with their children. Assuredly it had chased cats; but this scarcely figures as a canine sin, and besides it had killed none of them. Far from blood-lust, its sole emotion at such times was regret that it could not climb trees and continue the sport.

Children wept at the scene of its sacrifice, while adults admired the bridge, and the episode proved to be one of the basics of many later and interesting neuroses.

A brief description will suffice: medium size, white with brown spots, one floppy ear and a tail that had been broken by the wheel of a farmer's cart as the dog had slept by the roadside. Of these characteristics the dog in dying suffered the loss only of its coloration: its soul was uniformly grey.

Upon reaching Hell, the struggling, howling, thoroughly outraged dog-soul under his arm, the Devil paused at the great bronze doors of his Castle, faced in the general direction of midwestern Gehenna, released the soul and, before it could fall to the smoking flagstones, swung one cloven foot and punted it away with every ounce of his fury and indignation.

Yowling, legs and tail rigid, the soul rose up, up, up, to disappear into the red-flickering haze that surrounded the Castle. The superhuman impetus of the kick traveled it in fantastic flight like some Spartan dog of Diana, high above the landscapes of Hell. Gradually

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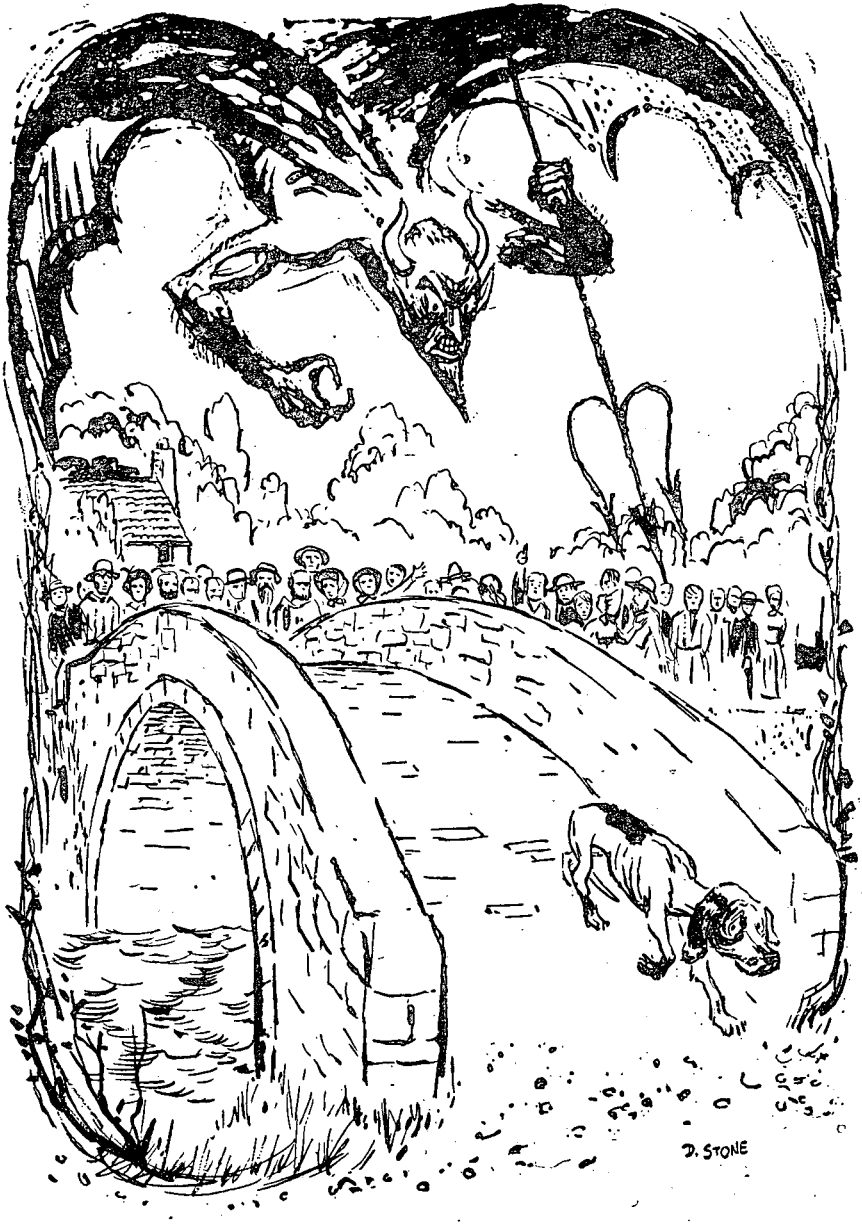

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the flight leveled, rounded downward, faster and faster, thick stinking air whistling louder and louder past the dog-soul's flapping ears, ruffling its grey soul-fur, bringing tears to its horrified eyes; faster and faster descending toward the ugly terrain that waited below. Its soul-hackles rose at the sight of coiling, unquenchable flames, of vast red-shot towers of smoke like dragons' breath; it curled its lips at the sight of spraying torrents of lava and blinding lakes of molten brass and iron; it gritted its teeth at the sight of jagged cliffs and dizzy black mountains and abysmal valleys from which rose the crack of whips, the clatter of demoniacal hooves, the cacophonous screeching of the damned.

It began to howl.

Far below, a demon looked up, pricking his ears. "What in Hell was *that?*"

Another demon wrenched his pitchfork from the buttocks of a prostrate soul. He squinted upwards. "Don't know . . . it's the Damnedest sound *I* ever heard. Maybe the Chief is trying out some new method of tormen —"

"Look out," said the first demon. "Something's falling toward us . . . *duck!*"

The dog-soul came turning and twisting down to splash deep into a pool of lava. Droplets like liquid rubies flew in every direction, some of them lighting on the soul-skin of the prostrate human soul, who whined shrilly, and others on the skins of the demons, which twitched in pleasure.

The dog-soul surfaced and swam about in the pool, lips drawn back, ears flattened, nose pointing upward, head straining forward, eyes wide. He dog-paddled. He barked his many misgivings.

The demons approached the pool cautiously. One, whose name was Zut, poked his pitchfork at the swimming soul. "What is it?"

The other demon, whose name was Pud, dropped to his knees, thrust his arm into the pool, fished around, got a good grip on the dog-soul, yanked it out. The dog-soul snarled and shook itself, eying the demons with utter distrust.

"I think it's a dog," said Pud, rubbing the lava into his arm.

"A dog?" said Zut doubtfully. "In Hell?"

"That's what it looks like. I wonder what on Earth he did?"

They leaned on their pitchforks, regarding the dog. The dog squatted, staring back at them warily. Some silent moments passed. When the demons made no hostile move, nor any move at all, the dog began to lick at the lava on his fur, worrying hardening bits with his teeth, keeping one eye always on the pair who stood watching.

Stinging smoke curled along at

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ground-level, like the ghosts of snakes. The prostrate human soul took advantage of his tormentors' preoccupation, and crawled away, inch by inch, and soon was lost to view in the red-flickering smoke.

Pud said, "They just never learn, do they? That Damned fool thinks he can give us the slip."

Zut said, "Yetzer will get him."

From nearby in the smoke came a blood-curdling shriek. The sucking sound of a pitchfork being withdrawn from fatty tissue. The dog pricked its ears.

Pud grinned evilly. "Yetzer got him."

They looked at the dog; finally Zut said, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"How do you torment a dog?"

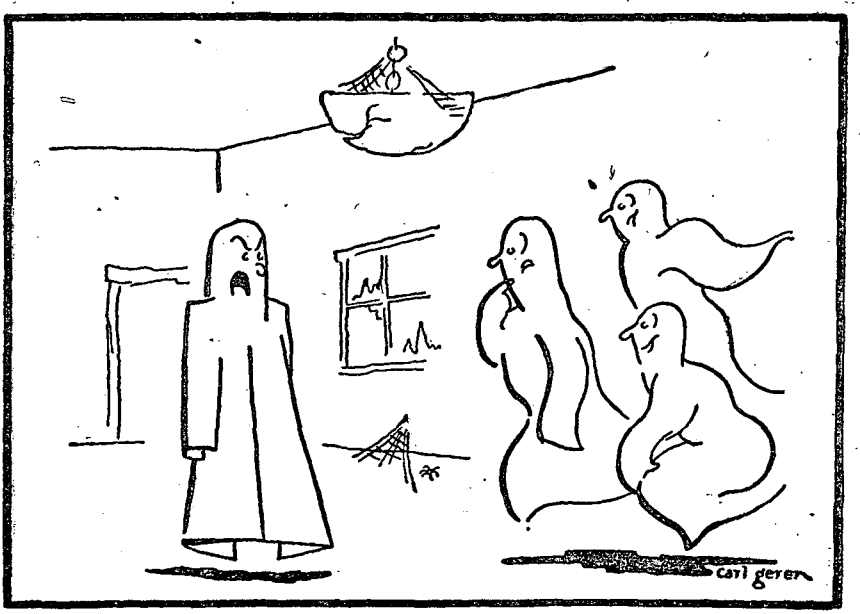
"H'm."

"I've heard they bite."

The dog stood up, reassured by the relative peace and quiet after that walloping kick and his resultant vast flight. He gave his tail a tentative wag, eying the demons somewhat more warmly.

"Watch out," Pud said.

The demons moved back a pace. The dog followed, frisking a little. The demons clutched their pitchforks in front of them and retreated another step. The dog halted and squatted, tongue lolling, eyes now merry.



"Okay—what wise guy put starch in my soup?"

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When the dog stopped, the demons stopped.

"You know," Zut said finally. "I think it wants to be friendly."

Pud scowled. "Watch your language."

"Well, *look* at it."

They studied it. It looked back at them, panting, eyes sparkling, tail thumping the ground and sending up little whirls of black ashes.

"You may be right," Pud said. "Go find out."

After a moment he said, "Well, go *on*. You can see he wants to be friendly."

"Why don't *you* go, then?"

"I'll see that he doesn't get away."

Zut skinned back his lips, revealing three-inch fangs.

"That's right," Pud said encouragingly. "Ours are bigger than his. Besides, there are two of us."

"Then let's *both* go," Zut said. He gave Pud a shove. "Follow me."

Together, pitchforks ready, they advanced toward the dog.

Playfully the dog bounded away into the smoke.

A moment later he bounded back, straight toward them, eyes gleaming redly, barking at the top of his lungs, grinning a dog grin.

The demons yowled and started to run. Pud tripped over his pitchfork. Zut tripped over Pud. They tumbled to the ground one this way and one that, dropping their pitchforks in order to protect themselves at close quarters.

The dog came over and sniffed at Pud's ear. Pud moaned. The dog dropped to his belly with a grunt. He licked the ear.

Pud flushed a dead white.

"You see?" said Zut, looking on in awe. "He *does* want to be friendly."

Slowly Pud's hand went toward the pitchfork beside him.

"Careful," Zut cautioned.

"I don't care," Pud said in a low, tight voice. "It's too much. Bless me, I — I feel *unclean* . . . to *think* that a damned soul would try to be friendly! I only hope nobody *saw* —"

"Courage," Zut whispered.

Pud's hand groped for the handle of the pitchfork, found it, closed on it.

He said a silent sacrilege. He leaped to his feet, raised the pitchfork high:

"Your damnation begins!" he roared.

The tines of the pitchfork swished down, entered the dog's hindquarters, traveled through the length of his body as through vapor, emerged from the very point of his nose. No agonized howl. No agonized leap. He only blinked.

Pud looked astounded. He tried again. This time the dog leaped

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at the shining tines as they emerged from his chest, and seemed disappointed when his jaws failed to close on solid substance. He barked playfully.

Pud spat vitriol and tested the tines on the ball of a long-clawed thumb. "Now what do you make of *that*?"

Zut had rolled over and was sitting up, looking thoughtful.

"He doesn't feel a thing," Pud said sourly. "I don't get it."

Zut pursed his lips. "C'mere, boy," he said, masking his revulsion. "Nice dog."

Tail wagging, the dog went to him.

Pud shuddered and looked around uncomfortably. "Now *you're* displaying what almost amounts to — to friendship!"

"Well, I'm not enjoying it!" Zut snapped. "I just want him to hold still, so I can find out something." He led the dog over to the pool of red-glowing lava into which it had originally plunged. The dog eyed the pool doubtfully and pulled back a little.

"What are you doing?" Pud asked.

"Well, it just occurred to me that he didn't wail and scream when he fell in here. He didn't seem to suffer at all. And now he doesn't feel our pitchforks."

"So?"

"So maybe he isn't . . . well, I know it sounds crazy, but — maybe he isn't *damned!*"

Kneeling beside the dog, he thrust one of its paws into the pool of lava. Interested, Pud came over to watch.

The dog stood there, paw in lava. He whined in friendly, puzzled fashion. Zut released the paw. The dog commenced licking off the lava.

Pud passed the tines of his pitchfork through the dog's abdomen and shrugged. "I guess he isn't, all right."

"What is *this?*" roared the superior demon, glaring at the stern-wagging soul they had brought in.

They told him.

"What is *this?*" roared the Chief Demon, glaring at the stern-wagging soul.

They told him.

"What is *this?*" roared the Fiend in Charge of Torment, glaring.

They told him.

"I know what this is," the Devil sighed. "In fact, I've been expecting it to show up. First time I've lost my temper in centuries. Hand it over . . . I've already made the necessary arrangements."

"Well, *hello*, boy," said Saint Peter. "They told me you'd be showing up. Come on, now . . . no, not *that* way — not so close to the edge. *This* way . . . through the gates. You missed out on that bread, but there's a Heavenly steak waiting. . . ."

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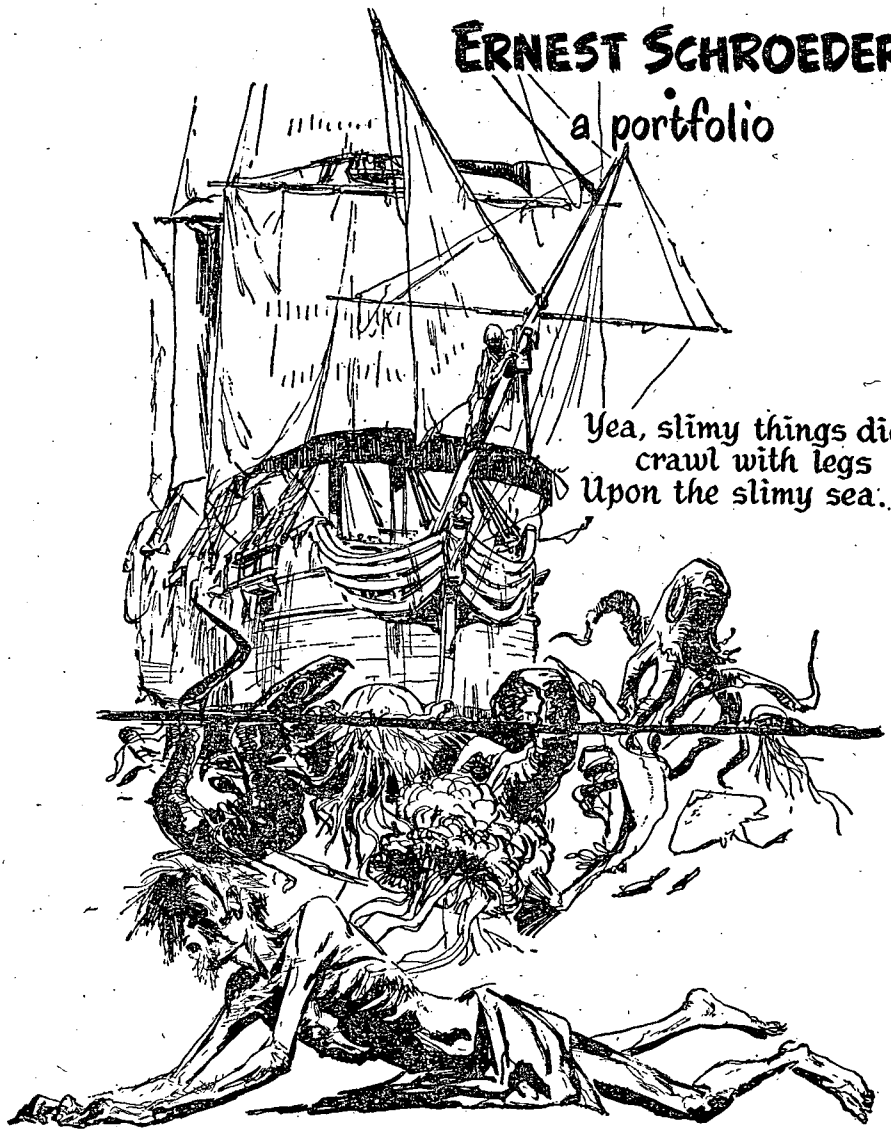
ERNEST SCHROEDER
a portfolio



With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
Agape they heard me call--

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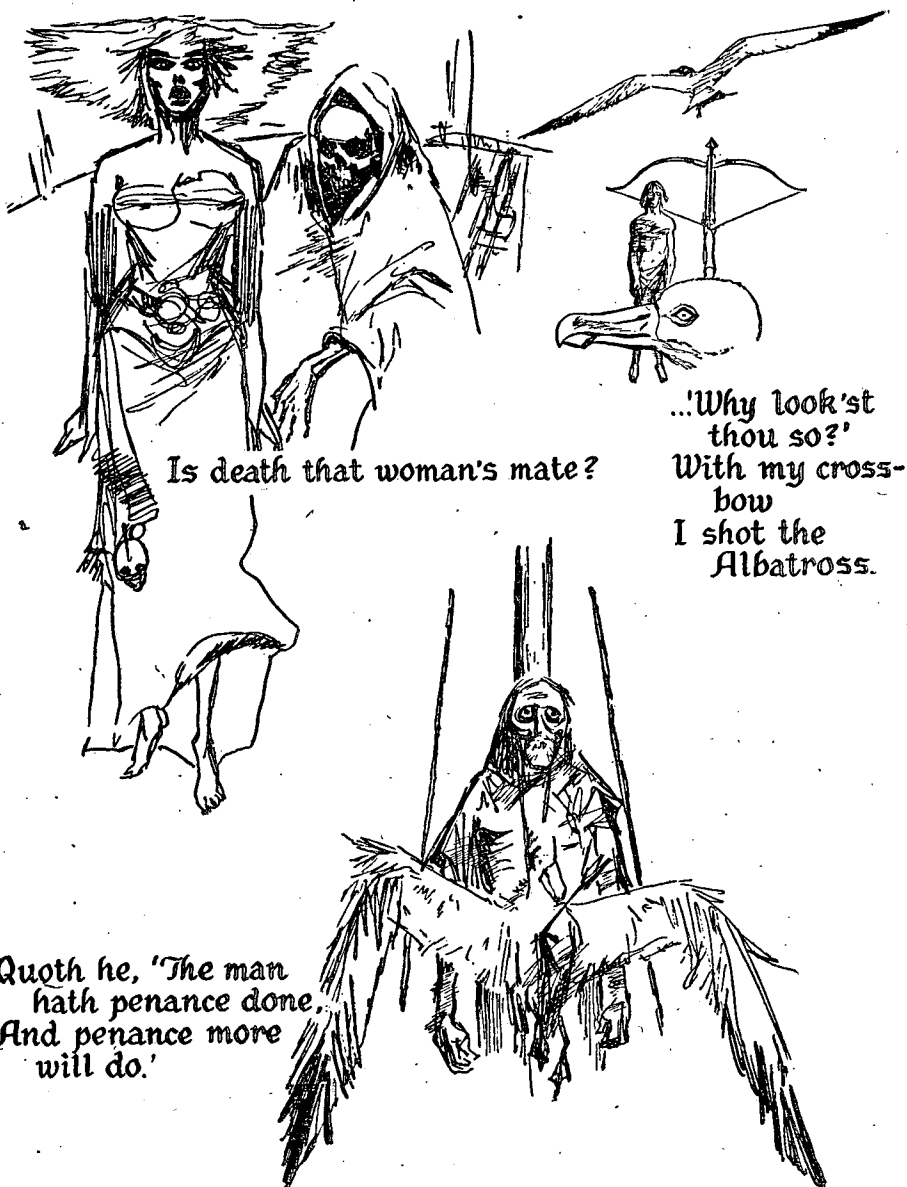
Is death that woman's mate?
...'Why look'st thou so?' With my cross-bow I shot the Albatross.
Quoth he, 'The man hath penance done, And penance more will do.'

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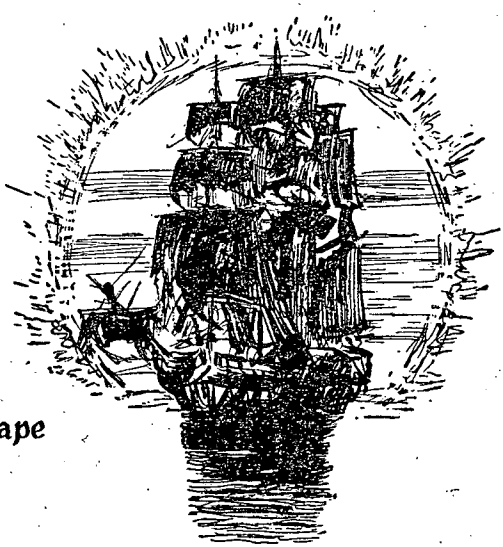
Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone, on a wide, wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.



When that strange shape
drove suddenly
Betwixt us and the
Sun.

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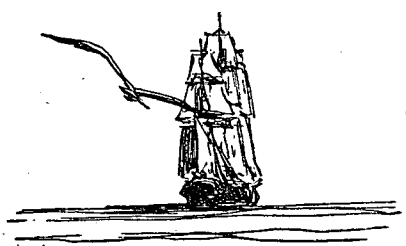
'The game is done! I've
won! I've won!'
Quoth she, and whistles
thrice.



As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

...The holy hermit
raised his eyes,
And prayed where
he did sit.

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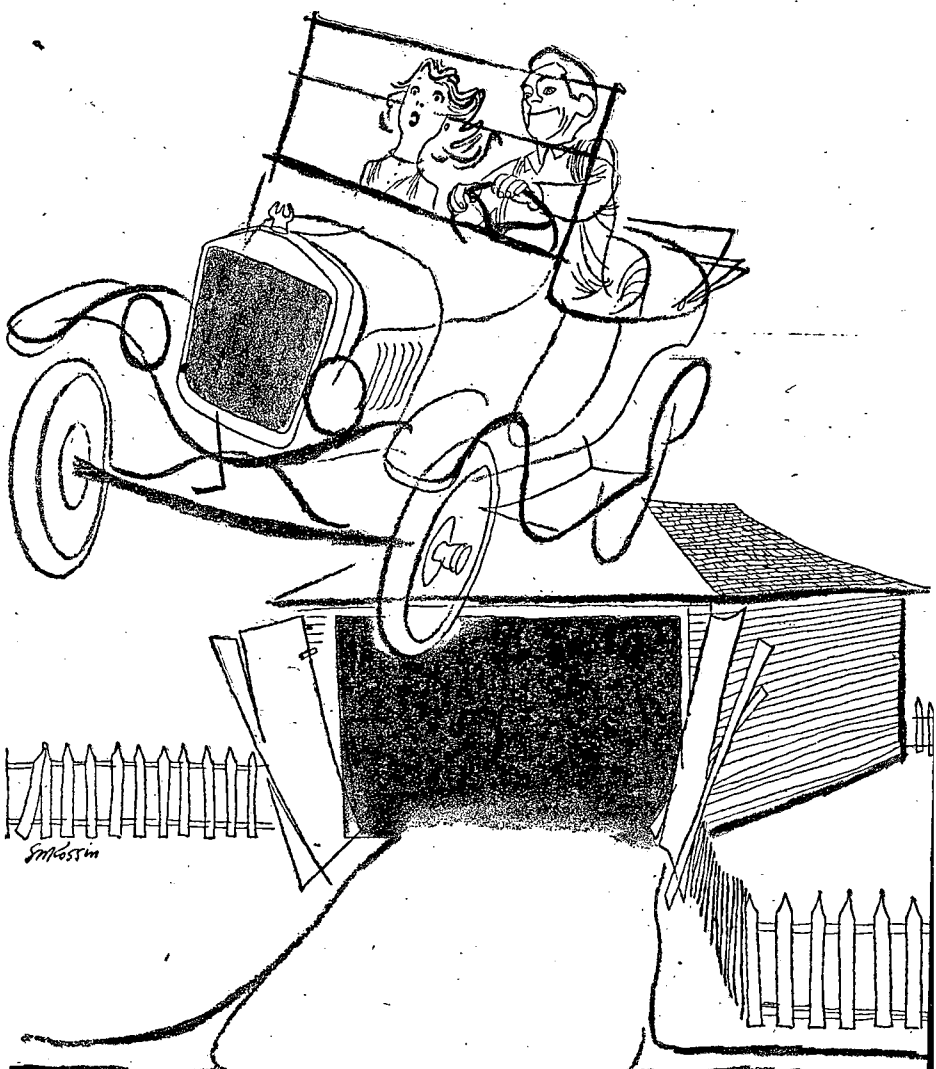
Illustrator: Sanford Kossin



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The Odyssey of Henry Thistle

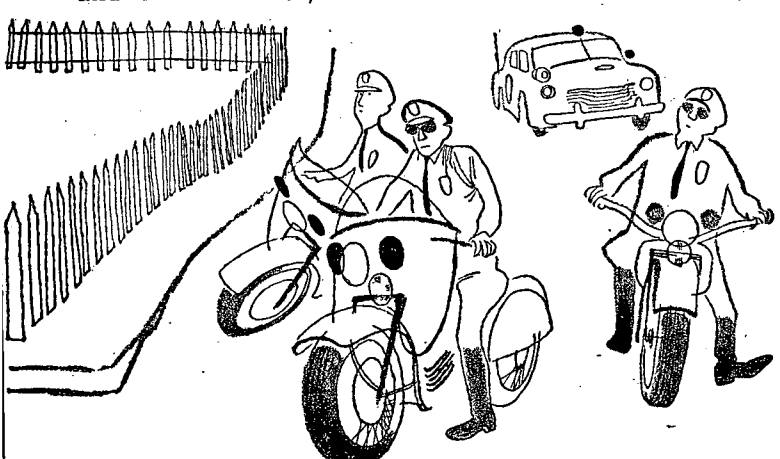
BY VERN FEARING

If you've been poking around Larceny Lew's used car lot in hopes of picking up a bargain, we urge you to read this story before *making the down payment. It won't tell you what to look for under the hood, but it'll explain why the mark of goat hoofs on the upholstery means satisfaction guaranteed.*

WHEN the moon is new and rain clouds appear, they say in Arcadia there is sometimes to be seen, shimmering in the mist, flying low over the hills, an old model T Ford, with half a dozen (the number varies) sheep and goats standing on the seats.

This does not seem reasonable, and Dr. Drimmler, the local historian, has plainly said, "The point is, it was not a Ford at all." Truer words were never spoken, but in the interest of clear thinking everywhere, it may be useful to append further information.

It was Saturday noon in Arcadia, and scarcely a day for supernatural manifestations in the sub-



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urbs. The sun was hot, the summer air hung heavy with peace and pollen. From the courthouse tower the chimes were striking, faithfully, melodiously. They were a source of community pride; not a screen door slammed when the chimes played; not a lawn mower mowed; cats yawned with care.

Henry Thistle could not have chosen a worse time to come rolling through the town square in his remarkable taxicab, accompanied by sounds that made one think of medieval warfare. Henry was very late, even for him, or decency would have brought him to a stop. As it was, seeing that traffic paused, he opened the throttle. This did not noticeably increase the speed, but it added a modern note — high *C* on a steam calliope — to the effect that was good for Henry's morale. Moreover, his passenger, Dr. Drimmler, bouncing in the rear, shouted encouragement for reasons of his own.

It was a mistake, not the worst Henry was to make that strange day, but a mistake. All one had to know was that His Honor, Mayor P. J. ("Carnivorous") Groatsby, who customarily enjoyed a midday snooze in his office, had come to a window and followed Henry's progress across the square with a small telescope.

Minutes later, the cab stopped on a shaded residential street. Henry jumped out and ran toward a large, ivy-covered frame house. An expert kick of his long legs got him over the hedge and into the flower bed.

"Is that you in the phlox, Henry?" Mrs. Beebe called from the porch.

Henry ran up, tracking fertilizer, in a panic. "Where is she? Don't tell me she didn't wait?"

"She said to meet her at the cake booth, unless she's rowing."

"Rowing? But *I'm* supposed to take her rowing! Am I responsible if Dr. Drimmler's car conks out and he hires me to take him around? Doesn't she appreciate the fact that I've been out all morning on errands of mercy, practically?"

"All Arcadia has heard of it," sighed Mrs. Beebe. "Henry, dear, with you so busy helping Mr. Drimmler, she had no idea when you'd —"

"But she knows the Doctor is due at the Fair and I'm taking him too! How late could I be?"

"I know, dear. I only meant to say that when the Bullwinkle boy offered her a lift, she accepted."

There was a horrible pause. "*Bullwinkle?*" croaked Henry.

"Would you like a glass of water, Henry?"

"Water?" It was amazing how much emotion he got into the word. "No, I'm fine," he said, and groaned resoundingly. "Just a little out of my skull with misery, that's all. Goodbye, Mrs. Beebe,

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and thanks . . . thanks . . ."

"Look out for the phlox, dear!" Mrs. Beebe called, too late.

"So?" said Dr. Drimmler philosophically when Henry told him. But he stopped there, and they rode on with neither talking, though they now shared the front seat, and with a minimum of noise from the taxi itself, which issued only a dispirited rattle. But presently there was a concerted honking of horns from behind, and a group of girls on bicycles passed. "Faster, Henry," suggested Dr. Drimmler.

"I'm trying, sir," said Henry, deep in gloom.

It was true, as the Doctor saw. The gas pedal was down to the floorboard, a recurrent condition which Henry usually explained as, "She's clogged, but she'll blow through." It was uncanny how this singular vehicle seemed to reflect Henry's mood. Not ten minutes earlier it had been positively frisky. Now, like Henry, it had lost its drive . . .

"Henry, if I'm going to judge the baby-diapering contest, we'd better get there before they run out of diapers."

There was improvement, but not much.

"Henry, you're too depressed. You must take hold. Life has its vicissitudes. This defeat may be temporary, a skirmish of no strategic value. On the other hand, in life, Henry, the girl does not always choose the nice young man who is working his way through college driving a hack all summer. Sometimes she chooses a nice young heir whose father owns the Bullwinkle Lumber Works. This is a test not only for you, but for Phoebe. You have a lot to offer. You have a strong character and a beautiful soul."

"Bullwinkle has a new car," said Henry.

"So? And that's enough to influence her?"

"A custom-made English racer, painted bright red, called a Crimson Siren, and cruises at a hundred."

"Hmmmm," said the Doctor, clearing his throat, and added, "Surely you couldn't be serious about a girl who decided her future on such a basis?"

"I could if the girl was Phoebe," said Henry.

"Did you say bright red?" asked the Doctor.

"Yes, why?"

"Is that it, on the other side of the traffic circle?"

"Right!"

The taxi suddenly shot forward, hit the curb, righted itself, and started rounding the curve with gathering speed. Fighting the wheel and the brake, Henry barely caught control as he exited from the circle, and managed a shuddering stop.

"Must've blown through!" cried

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Henry to Dr. Drimmler, who was almost beyond caring. Behind them the lights had changed, and the bright red car — with Bullwinkle and Phoebe in it — was approaching.

"Hi, Henry! Hi, Dr. Drimmler!"

Henry turned at her voice. The red car was alongside; it was the perfect shade for Phoebe's ash blonde hair; he was stabbed to see how at home she was.

"Hi, Doc," said George Bullwinkle genially. "Say, Henry, I hear you got the goat smell out of your cab. Congratulations."

Henry said, "Bullwinkle, I'm ignoring you for your own safety," and fixed his wounded gaze on Phoebe. "Your mother said you couldn't wait for me. I assumed it was because you were in a hurry to get to the Fair."

"Henry, honestly —"

"We're both in a hurry," Bullwinkle broke in. With that there was a muffled explosion and a diminishing roar, and the English racer had reached a bend in the highway and vanished before Henry could readjust his expression. But readjust he did, and to the situation as well. Undaunted, he set out in pursuit.

The Doctor held on, the taxicab lurched and swayed. It was doing marvelously, making almost thirty miles an hour when it swept around the bend. There Constable Crouch came out on a motorcycle from behind a signboard and promptly flagged it down.

"What's wrong?" demanded Henry. It was the wrong tone to use on the Constable, but Henry's blood was hot with the chase.

"That's enough outen you," said Constable Crouch, writing away.

"What's this?" said Henry, stupefied by what he read. "*Me* speeding?"

"Yup."

"But I *can't* speed!"

"This here ticket says different," the Constable pointed out, refuting him. "You argue it out with Mayor Groatsby in court Monday." He grinned. "Wouldn't s'prise me if you're expected."

"Look here, Constable," said Dr. Drimmler, "there's no truth to this charge, and I'll testify to it."

"Why, sure, Doc! See you in court."

"Wait!" cried Henry. "If I was speeding, what about the car ahead of me? Why didn't you get him?"

"Well, now," said the Constable, "to tell the truth, I didn't b'lieve I could've caughten him." Henry stared, so did the Doctor, but Mr. Crouch was poker-faced; when no further questions were forthcoming, he got on his motorcycle, putt-putt, and went to find another signboard.

After a bit, the Doctor said, "Henry, we can't just sit here."

"No, sir," said Henry dully. He touched the starter. "This

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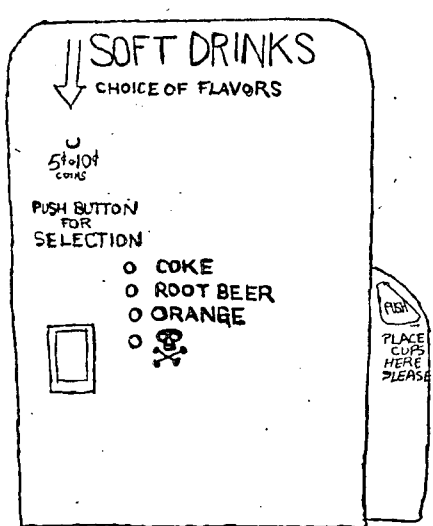
could mean a twenty-five buck fine." The motor wasn't catching. "If there was a reason, some kind of reason." The starter seemed very weak. He checked the ignition and tried again. Nothing happened. The distributor — the gasoline gauge.

Henry turned slowly to Dr. Drimmler, but the understanding Doctor was looking toward the horizon he seemed unlikely to attain; better than most men he knew there are times when human agency is powerless, and only faith abides.

"I'll look inside," said Henry. "What's it sound like to you, Dr. Drimmler?"

"Kidneys," said Dr. Drimmler thoughtfully.

Henry dragged himself from the cab and opened the hood. After that, save for a tinkle of metal now and then, the serenity of the countryside remained undisturbed. The Doctor's eyelids flickered and he dozed . . .



This was the peaceful scene when Bullwinkle's car eased noiselessly to a stop abreast of the taxi. "C'mon, Doc!" he shouted. "We came back for you!"

The Doctor leaped up, startled, half out of the cab and half out of his skin. Henry clanged his head on the hood, then emerged and hung on dizzily to a fender.

"Henry," said Phoebe gently, "the committee asked George to help out. We told them you were coming, but when —"

"I know," said Henry, very quietly. "It's darned nice of old Bullwinkle . . . isn't it, Doctor?"

"Yes," said Dr. Drimmler.

He took his bag and changed cars. Phoebe had to press close to Bullwinkle to make room.

In a moment they had turned around and were gone.

Henry was alone. The day had begun full of promise; suddenly it was over. His girl was lost, his client was forfeit, a summons for an impossible offence reposed in his barren wallet, and his taxicab had ceased to function . . .

For all he knew, it had not only ceased, but deceased. He let his eyes wander over it with a feeling of love and pain, remembering all his hopes for it. "Son," the man

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who owned the junkyard had told him, "I don't even guarantee it's an automobile. It must've been *something* before its accident, but whether that was a gondola or a droshki I cannot say. It has an engine, which is a clue, but no engine would be better. And it has a mighty peculiar odor, as I see you've already noticed." But Henry had not been dissuaded. He had scoured half the state to find something he could afford; a little more scouring, a paint job, an overhaul, some welding, some wiring, a part or two, and the Thistle Taxicab Company would be a reality. He had labored profoundly and given it his heart. Whatever ailed it, he oiled it . . .

It had repaid his devotion capriciously. A tear sped down his nose; it confused him; he was not used to self-pity, but there were few times in his life when he had been so low.

But now he perceived that the motor was running, making not a sound.

Yes, it was. The hood was open and he could see the motor, and the fan. Furthermore, Henry was by now in the correct frame of mind to comprehend that everything can happen. Now that he observed it, the cab was not only bouncing a little, but rocking, as though having turned itself on, it was preparing to undertake movement. Henry reached out to close the hood. The metal was vibrating at a prodigious rate, like a live, shivering thing.

He got into the cab and was not surprised to note that the dashboard instruments were not registering. Gingerly, he tried the gas pedal. The motor remained inaudible, but the whole frame seemed to flutter, gathering itself, eager. He put his hands on the wheel and all his fears fell away. Something wonderful, incalculably wonderful, was about to happen. He knew it.

Then he released the clutch and let her go.

The Arcadia General Hospital was suffering a disturbance when Henry regained consciousness. There had been a loud crash in the adjoining room, followed by screams and shouts; they had brought Henry to, but now it was quiet again. He stared at the white ceiling and Dr. Drimmler's face hove into view, directly overhead.

". . . How do you feel, Henry?"

"All right."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"Speed," said Henry softly. "It was incredible . . . like flying." He closed his eyes. "Was the cab wrecked?"

"No," said the Doctor. "Tell me more about the speed."

". . . I don't know." He frowned, until furrows seemed to force his eyes open again, but they

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were slits. "The motor started, all by itself," he said slowly.

"So? By itself? And then?"

"I wish I knew. Either I can't remember, or there isn't much to remember . . . just getting in, starting, and the terrific speed . . . like flying . . ." He turned to look at the Doctor. "I'm not hurt, am I? I feel all right."

There was a shattering of glass in the room next door, after which a door slammed violently and a quivering silence was restored.

"I must see about getting your room changed," said the Doctor.

"What for? Where are my clothes?"

Dr. Drimmler gently pushed Henry's head back to the pillow. "Now, listen to me, Henry. An hour ago you were flat on your back, under a tree, and your taxicab was hanging from the branches by a rear wheel. Apparently you lost the curve at Tucker's Ridge and went over the cliff. You've had a miraculous escape, but the shock is far from having worn off, and you need rest."

". . . Tucker's Ridge," said Henry. "But the Ridge is maybe four miles from where I started — where Crouch stopped us — and the whole ride was over in a few seconds. How is that possible?"

"Just relax, rest."

"Where is my cab now?"

The Doctor sighed. "Forget the cab, Henry. You've had your last ride in it. The Constable was here. He told me Mayor Groatsby plans to condemn it Monday as a safety hazard." He rose from his chair. "Frankly, it may be just as well. I hardly feel you're emotionally equipped to handle that vehicle."

"Thanks," said Henry dully. "Just tell me where my cab is."

"Swanson's garage said they'd get it home for you."

"Home," Henry groaned, sick with guilt. It was the first time he had thought of home, and of his aunt Lucy, with whom he lived; she had gone to Grahamsville for a weekend visit, but if the news reached her . . . "Does aunt Lucy know about this?" he asked.

"No, I delayed calling her. Tomorrow, if all goes well, you can leave here and be home before she's back." The Doctor fumbled in his coat pocket and held out something to Henry. "Here," he smiled, "I'm told you were found with this lying on your chest."

Henry looked at the object without touching it, suspiciously. It was a crude set of reed pipes, bound with viny tendrils. "Not on *my* chest," said Henry. "No, sir."

"So?" Dr. Drimmler considered the disclaimer; reflectively he raised the pipes for a trial blow. The sound was ghastly, and he tossed the reeds to Henry in dismay and went to the door. There he paused, beaming. "I saved the best news for last. Get ready for a lovely visitor."

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The Doctor had not been gone a moment when the door opened and a striking brunette came in. She had a magnificent figure; her clothes seemed to lag behind her as she approached Henry's bed.

"Dear boy," she said breathlessly, "so you have the syrinx?"

"What?" said Henry. "You must be mistaken. I don't have anything, I'm here because of an accident. If you —"

She wrapped her arms around him and planted a lingering kiss on his lips. "You'll tell me, won't you?" she murmured, and let him have another treatment.

This, thought Henry, was what it must be like to drown. It was wonderful. Gasping, he opened his eyes and looked deep into hers, as into pits where cold green fire blazed. An unmeasurable interval passed, then she sat up, and in the space that formed between them, Henry's somewhat blurred vision encountered Phoebe Beebe, standing in the open doorway.

"Monster!" said Phoebe. "Bluebeard!"

She whirled and the door slammed shut.

"Wait!" cried Henry, but it was useless; the dark girl had enveloped him again, and she was stronger than he. When she let go, he was numb. A roaring in his ears made it impossible to understand what she was saying; a word that sounded like *siren* kept recurring in her questioning, which meant nothing unless it meant Bullwinkle's red racer, and fear seized him as he realized she was getting set to kiss him again.

In desperation he blurted, "Bullwinkle has it!"

"Ahhh. But who is Bullwinkle?"

"George Bullwinkle . . . Sterling Drive . . ."

"Thank you," said the girl, getting up at once. "You see how unnecessary that embarrassing scene was?"

"Please go," Henry moaned.

She went, without a backward glance . . .

Presently, mustering strength, Henry climbed out of his bed; his one thought was to get away, clothes or no clothes. He made it to a window, opened the screen, and looked down with disappointment to the hospital yard, five flights below; he was thus engaged when Dr. Drimmler, a second doctor, and a male nurse, dashed into the room, shouting entreaties not to jump, until they grabbed him and carried him to the bed. His protests were smothered, and he gave up resistance.

"It's only lipstick!" said the male nurse. "I thought he'd cut his throat."

Dr. Drimmler and his colleague regarded the exhausted youth with melancholy. "Just in time," Dr. Drimmler. He's obviously in a worse state than you suspected. Heaven knows what transpired

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here to have made Miss Beebe run by us in such tears, poor girl."

"He's talking, Doctor. What did you say, Henry?"

". . . I said it was another girl."

The second Doctor bent over, alert. "*Who* was another girl?"

There was no answer. Henry looked confounded.

"Do you mean Phoebe?" asked Dr. Drimmler, gently.

"No, the one you sent here. She wanted Bullwinkle."

"I see. They all want Bullwinkle, is that it?"

"No, just this one. She kept asking about his car."

The two doctors exchanged glances. "Yes," said Dr. Drimmler, sadly, "they all want Bullwinkle, because of his car . . ."

And a few minutes later, Henry's blanket was exchanged for a restraining sheet.

It was dusk when Henry woke. The room was dark and still. He turned his head to the right, to the left; no further movement was possible. He lay there, thinking, listening to a distant dull rumble of thunder.

A voice called; a man's: "You in there, can't you hear me?"

"Who's that? Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am, it's where I am. I'm outside your window. Will you open the screen, please?"

"I can't move."

"Too bad."

There was a scratching on the sill, then the sound of a screen being punched through, and footsteps bounded lightly into the room.

An indistinct form stood close to the bed. A match flared. In the small yellow light, Henry and his visitor looked at one another. Henry saw a diminutive man, with dark, creased, generous features. He wore a derby hat and a wing-collar and tie; a pair of patent-leather shoes hung around his neck, tied by their laces; a glimpse of a frock coat and a pale vest completed the vignette.

"You'll burn your fingers," said Henry, somewhat tardily, for the room smelled sharply of singed hair and barbecue.

The match went out. "Tied you down too, have they? What a miserable hospital; I was hours working myself free. I'm from next door. Are you the fellow I heard playing pipes this afternoon?"

"No, that was my doctor. Dr. Drimmler."

"Oh . . . Then he has them?"

"No, they're here — unless the wastebasket was emptied."

An oath, in a foreign tongue, but unmistakable, erupted in the darkness, after which Henry heard the wastebasket being emptied. "I have them! What a relief!"

"I'm glad. Are they yours?"

"Yes, indeed." He had returned to the bedside. "I never thought

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I'd see this syrinx again. I'm deeply obliged. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Henry thought. "No," he said, and then, "You call those pipes a syrinx?"

"Not I, especially; the word syrinx means pipes. Why?"

"I didn't know. There was a girl in here asking about them."

"Was there! I knew it! A dark, ravishing beauty?"

"Yes, ravishing."

"I knew it! . . . You sent her to the Doctor, I suppose?"

"No, to George Bullwinkle."

"Who is he? Did the Doctor get the pipes from him?"

"No, it was all a mistake."

"Splendid! . . . But where did the Doctor get them?"

"He says they were found on me after I had an accident in my car. That's why I'm here."

"Because they were found on you?"

"No, because of the accident."

"I'm sorry. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"I'm not sure. They think I'm suffering from shock."

"Do they really? You sound clear as a bell. I'd stake my reputation on it."

"Even if I told you I think my car was flying?"

There was a pause. ". . . You're joking."

"No. That's the trouble."

Again a pause. ". . . I can't believe it."

"No one can."

"I didn't mean it that way. Oh, I *believe* you, believe *me!* I *must* have a look at that car! Where is it?"

"It's home by now. We have a sign out front: Lucy Thistle — Antiques."

"I'll never find it. I always lose my way; I start out to go somewhere and end up deep in the woods. Will you come with me?"

"How?"

"Forgive me." The little man began to attack the restraining sheet with great energy. Just as he completed his task, there was a sound of a key in the door. "Quiet," whispered Henry's benefactor, and tip-toed swiftly across the room.

The door opened. A shaft of light fell into the room, and so did a male nurse as the little man bashed his head with a shoe. The door closed. The little man returned to find Henry standing. He took his hand and guided him.

"But the door's that way," said Henry.

"The window, I think, is safer."

"We're five stories up."

"You needn't worry, I'll carry you on my back. I'm very sure-footed, and strong for my size. Here, get on. Bend your knees a bit more, please." Quickly, he mounted the sill and thrust a leg out the window. "Close your eyes."

Henry had already done so . . .

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He felt a fresh wind against his cheeks. There were voices and motors to be heard below, and from far off, reverberating thunder. The descent was steady, astonishingly swift. When Henry's dangling feet touched ground, he sank to his knees and breathed again.

They were in the hospital yard, in a landscaped border close to the building wall, hidden by firs and shrubs. The little man sat beside him, putting on his shoes.

"Let's borrow a car," he whispered. "Pick out a good one."

Ten minutes later, Henry drove an ambulance into the Thistle driveway; his friend and he had rushed it, unaware, and their unhappy discovery had come too late to turn back. Fortunately, the neighboring houses were blacked out for television, their occupants in a trance. The Thistle back yard stood deep in shadow, surrounded by sycamores.

The garage was unlocked (it had no lock), and the taxicab was inside, right side up.

"Can you turn on the lights for a moment?"

"I have a flashlight," said Henry. He found it in a tool chest. "You take it. My hands are trembling."

Henry's friend played the beam of light over the cab. Everything was in order, even the tires; save for a dented fender and some pussy willow in the radiator, it had come through unscathed. The condition of the motor was a question, perhaps, but the motor was not new and neither was the question.

"You've made changes," said the little man. "Some good ones."

"Then you knew this car before I bought it?"

"Long before. It's quite old. That's why I believed you . . . I know what this car can do . . ."

"We'd better not have any more light showing here."

"In a moment."

The little man climbed into the cab and continued his inspection. Henry came closer to watch. The night was growing damp; he was anxious to get into the house for some clothes, but the little man was now rummaging under the rear seats.

"Are you looking for something? Can I help you?"

"I doubt it." He moved a door handle, then reached down and slid open a door compartment previously unknown to Henry. "I'm trying to find out why she's so intent on locating this car."

"Who?"

"Diana," said the little man. He tried the other door. "You know — the girl who asked about the syrinx." He opened a second, mysterious recess and let out a cry. "Letters!" Out came a dusty packet of envelopes, tied with faded red ribbon. "Here, hold the light for me, please!"

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Henry obeyed. His friend opened a letter, scanned it with exclamations of joy, then opened a second, a third, and laughed triumphantly. "They're *love* letters! Can you imagine what *her* love letters are like? No wonder she's so hot for this chariot! Love letters!"

Henry switched off the flashlight. "I don't understand."

"Very simple. Your taxi used to belong to Diana's brother; he and I don't hit it off, so I borrowed the car without his permission. There was a wreck. Naturally, I had to abandon it. Then I realized I'd left my syrinx in it, and I couldn't find the car again — I never seem to pay attention to where I am — and soon the news leaked out. Diana's been hounding me to locate the wreck ever since. I suppose you heard her smashing up my room in the hospital? Hardly gracious behavior, after she'd put me there. But this makes everything worth —"

Henry broke in. "Listen! . . . Sirens!"

"Yes. They're coming this way."

"It's the police. We're caught."

"Not a bit. Get in, I'll drive. Not the ambulance — *here!*"

"But it may not go!"

"Hold fast."

"The garage doors!"

"Too bad."

They came out of the driveway and turned into the street on two wheels; the rear ones; a police car, screaming down at them, swinging a fearful red spotlight, never even saw them pass.

Henry's taxicab was flying again.

They were not very high up, a few hundred feet perhaps. After awhile, Henry was used to it. Overhead, the moon was a mere sliver, but brilliant stars filled the sky, the hills sparkled with light, streams and valleys shone. The countryside lay nightbound, silent. A nocturnal bird winged by.

"Your teeth are chattering. Do you want my coat?"

"No, thank you. I don't mind. I feel . . . I feel . . ."

"I know."

They flew on. Presently, the little man took out his syrinx and began to play. Henry listened enchanted. The music rose and fell, gay and pensive by turn, melody such as he had never heard. When it ended, Henry felt uplifted.

"Did you notice?" asked his friend. "Driving no hands?"

"Yes."

". . . Shall I take her down?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I've been thinking."

"So have I . . . What are your plans?"

"Confused. It won't be easy, clearing myself. Which reminds me — about the letters . . ."

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"You want copies? I'll see to it."

"But there's a rule. Articles found in taxicabs must be turned over to the police. I'm willing to stretch a point with your syrinx; I didn't find it, for one; and after hearing you play, I can't imagine it belonging to anyone else . . ."

"You're very kind."

". . . But I'm in enough trouble as it is."

"I understand. It desolates me. Still, I do have my pipes back, and I'm grateful. Here are the letters."

The little man got out, and Henry saw that they had landed in a meadow. "Do you think you can handle her yourself now?"

"I'm sure of it," said Henry. "Can't I take you somewhere?"

"But we are somewhere. This is fine."

Henry watched his friend walk off across the dewy field. The last he saw of him, he was throwing away his shoes . . .

There were lights in several rooms of the Beebe house. It made Henry's task more difficult. He hovered some feet above the weather-vane, suspended in doubt. Calling in hospital pajamas was bad enough; it would not help matters to land on the roof. With a sigh of regret, he eased his taxi down into the flower bed.

It was but a step from the radiator to the porch. He rang the bell, hid behind a rattan chair, and waited for the door to open.

"George?" The porch lit up and Phoebe came out, a vision in white. "George, behave yourself. Where are you?"

"Turn off the lights. This is Henry."

She started, then retreated, a step at a time; then leaned weakly against the door and reached in for the light switch.

Henry emerged. "Phoebe, I got away from the hospital."

"Yes, I — I heard . . ."

"I want to explain everything."

"You must go back . . . Will you go back?"

"Phoebe?" her mother's voice called from within. "I'm bringing in the punchbowl. Is that George with you?"

"No, mother," and after a slight hesitation: "It's Henry."

"Well, isn't he going to come in?"

"Mother, do you hear me? It's Henry . . . *Henry.*"

There was a watery crash, then silence.

"Why doesn't your mother say something?"

". . . W-what would you l-like her to s-say?"

"I hope you're not thinking of calling anyone —"

"Henry, you mustn't feel persecuted. We're your friends."

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"Because they can't catch me. If they get close, I'll fly off."

"Of course. What else?"

"I don't like this. You're so agreeable. Aren't you still angry about that girl in the hospital? I'll tell you something: she's with Bullwinkle right now. I saw them on my way here, so there's no use waiting for him . . . Why are you backing away?"

"Henry, I don't doubt — Henry, if you dare — Put me down!"

But Henry was running across the porch, with Phoebe slung over a shoulder, kicking and screaming. He climbed the rail, leaped nimbly, and landed sprawling in the phlox. A moment later, with Phoebe on the seat beside him, Henry's taxi burst through the hedge and went wheeling down the road.

He was not sorry, Henry told himself. His resolve had not faltered; it was time he had done something constructive. And Phoebe would concur heartily, he knew, as soon as she got over her hysterics.

". . . Phoebe, it's a beautiful night . . ."

There was no comforting her. Even promises not to fly, unless it became absolutely necessary, had been useless (though it seriously hampered his search for Bullwinkle), and explanations were proving more intricate than he had been able to forsee.

"Phoebe, that girl wanted pipes that belong to a friend of her brother's. He owned this car, but the friend wrecked it and left his pipes. The girl wanted to find my car because she had some love letters in it. That's clear, isn't it? So I said Bullwinkle had the pipes, because I thought she meant his car, and now they're out driving and she'll vouch for everything when we find them. All right?"

She only sobbed again. But presently, as he drove on at reduced speed, and the cab's swaying diminished, she stirred and sat up a bit. Her tear-stained face looked up at him, tender, compassionate. "Henry, I want to help you . . . Does it help if I say I believe you?"

"Do you really?"

"Yes."

"And you're not afraid anymore?"

". . . No."

"Good. Because you know what? — I'm sure I hear the Constable behind us on his motorcycle, and now I'll let him catch up."

"Dear, sweet Henry, you're doing this for me?"

"For you, Phoebe. Watch me run him right off the road."

It was heart-warming to feel her slide closer, her head nestled against his shoulder (he had no idea she had fainted). His atten-

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tion was divided between the dark, unwinding road and the motorcycle. It was running without lights, approaching in tentative spurts, disarmingly. When it drew even with the cab, there was Mr. Crouch, with a remarkably fiendish grin.

"H'lo, young feller, feelin' better?"

Henry nodded modestly and went faster.

"Never mine that. Pull over!"

Henry shook his head and kept accelerating.

" 'Course, I could plug you," said the Constable, staying alongside, "if I was sure that there girl is dead. Strangled 'er, maybe?"

Henry smiled mysteriously. The wind rose to a furious whistle.

"I'm warnin' you! I'll plug them tires!"

They were doing seventy. When Henry let the car out again, they passed eighty, and the Constable stopped trying to get at his gun. Once more the motorcycle crept up. Henry leaned over the cab door, chin on his clasped hands, waiting for the Constable to see him. When it happened, the look on Mr. Crouch's face was rewarding. Henry laughed so hard he kicked the gas pedal. The taxi rocketed up a hill, reached the summit and kept going — and there it was, flying again.

"Phoebe, look! This is just how it happened the first time!"

She flopped over, alarmingly limp. He propped her up on the seat. Apparently (he decided) the excitement of being airborne had overcome her. But the worst was over; the abundant fresh air was sure to revive her soon, after which, seeing that they were safely aloft, she would relax . . .

But shortly afterward, Henry spied Bullwinkle's racer. The powerful headlights were unmistakable. It was proceeding at a fast clip along an old country highway, a serpentine asphalt strip in large disuse except among motorized lovers and the hot rod set. In a way it was disappointing to have come upon him so quickly; Phoebe had been stirring again, and Henry was anxious for her conversion. But there was business to settle, and if Diana was still with Bullwinkle, delay seemed foolhardy. The weather was changing fast; scarcely a star was to be seen, and the updrafts were increasingly turbulent.

The cab descended by degrees until Henry saw a promising stretch, then it touched and rolled.

"Hey, Bullwinkle, stop!"

Diana was there. Neither she nor Bullwinkle reacted to Henry's materialization with visible joy; Bullwinkle, in fact, with horror. Instead of stopping, he pulled away sharply — but only for a moment before he was overtaken — and his continuing acceleration

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was matched with ease. The taxi was incontestably faster. As this became evident, Bullwinkle's consternation mounted, and so did his speed, each compounding the other, and by the time the two cars passed the new Freeport cut-off, still abreast, they were traveling at something over a hundred miles an hour.

There the race ended. Helplessly, Henry watched another hill roar down on them. With a sinking feeling he realized he was flying . . .

Anxiously, Henry hovered a mile or so farther along the road, but Bullwinkle did not come. Henry had lost sight of him and sailed over the valley to wait. A strange sound came. He froze attentively. Presently, with some disgust, he identified the distant striking of Arcadia's relentless courthouse chimes. Bullwinkle had either turned back or cut off his lights and gone into hiding.

He began to circle back, getting enough altitude for a panorama, and rose over the hill that had launched him. He saw a beam of light slanting up into the murky sky. It rose like a beacon from a cornfield bordered by the road, and Henry knew it was one of Bullwinkle's headlights.

At that instant, the heavens opened. A bolt of lightning covered the horizon, a tremendous white band, its core a bright copper, its edges lined with violet. There was a great, hissing sound, and then a mighty clap of thunder that shook the earth and the air, and said to sinner and saint alike: "*Look out, brother!*" The rain came down like a waterfall.

Down plummeted the taxi in a maneuver that jarred Phoebe back to consciousness, then slammed her against the windshield and knocked her out again.

Henry landed close to Bullwinkle's overturned car. It lay among mangled cornstalks; a torn and twisted crop, now hammered by the rain, traced its career from where it had left the road. Bullwinkle had been thrown some feet away. He scarcely seemed to be breathing. There was no sign of Diana, no clue to her fate, and no time to be lost. Bullwinkle was badly hurt, and Henry's duty was appallingly clear.

"Well, sir!" said Constable Crouch, thus eloquently conveying his pleasure as still another newspaper photographer took his picture. The Arcadia General Hospital ordinarily took a dim view of flash-bulbs on its premises, but turmoil had relaxed the rules. Refugees from the cloudburst crowded the waiting rooms and corridors, their interest less in the great storm outside, now abating, than in the storm within. In the lobby, a morbid swarm hung on the Constable's evaluation of each new

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rumor that buzzed down from Surgery Five. Between pronouncements, he posed for shots to be captioned "*A VIGILANT HERO*" and furnished reporters with the harrowing details of "*HIS ENCOUNTER WITH A MADMAN; 'SUPER-STRENGTH' NO MYTH, HE AVERS.*" They scribbled away, sick with wondering whether the disrupted telephone service, now accepting only emergency calls, would be restored in time to get the whole magnificent mess into the Sunday crime supplements.

"Let's check, Constable, we newspapermen have to be *right*. The two boys had a feud over a girl. Thistle lost out, tried to kill himself. Instead he had an accident that apparently deranged him. He conked an attendant, bust out of the hospital, stole an ambulance, got to his taxi, kidnapped the girl, and tried to kill everybody by crashing Bullwinkle's car. Okay? Okay. Now, what made him come back to the hospital with Bullwinkle and the girl?"

"Just didn't know what he was doin'."

"And how did you happen to be here at the hospital?"

"Had 'im figgered. Just say that. You got the part where he jumped me with the fire axe?"

Upstairs, Henry listened to experts and said nothing. He sat quietly in a chair, arms folded across his chest stoically, albeit wearing a strait jacket. It was not needed. Henry's only demonstration of super-strength had been his staggering entrance to the hospital, utterly soaked, streaked with gore, carrying Bullwinkle. With his burden transferred, he had allowed himself to be led away, silent and shivering, and put under guard. (Constable Crouch's role had been less glorious than his account of it, consisting of an arrival ten minutes later, a brief audience with the prisoner, and the announcement that he was under arrest.) Henry wondered what would be done with him, but his speculations were contradictory, like his interrogators.

They were debating Henry's refusal to answer the last question; what caused it; how this differed from his refusal to answer any of their previous questions; whether this called for a new approach; and whose; and the dangers of each other's diagnosis. They included a dietician, an anesthetist, two opposed physiotherapists (like book-ends), a glandular theorist, a nature faker, and a dental mechanic. The healing arts had not suffered such a setback in Arcadia since an epidemic of athlete's foot some years before.

Mercifully, the gentle pitter of the rain and the patter of the experts, lulled Henry to sleep. When both ceased, he came to slowly,

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and found himself alone with Dr. Drimmler.

". . . Henry, will you talk to me?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Thank you, Henry . . . I'm here to help you, Henry."

"Yes, Doctor."

"You understand everything, don't you, Henry?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Henry, if we play our cards right, we can have you held for observation and work our way out of this later on. It may take a few weeks, but they have movies every Wednesday and the billiard table is a beauty. Do you understand, Henry?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Otherwise, it will go hard with you. The charges against you include theft of an ambulance, endangering public safety, speeding, reckless, driving, resisting arrest, kidnapping, attempted vehicular homicide, and in the case of the male nurse, assault with a deadly weapon."

"I disagree, Doctor."

"In what way?"

"He was hit with a shoe, and a shoe is not a deadly weapon."

"But you had no shoes."

"The man who had the room next door had the shoes. He wore them around his neck. Later he threw them away."

"I see. How did you get out of the hospital?"

"He carried me down the side of the building into the street."

Dr. Drimmler sat and thought for a few moments. At length he nodded and remarked reassuringly to Henry, "The billiard table is a real beauty." He took out some paper and a pen. "Tell me the whole story in your own way. It may have some weight as evidence."

"Yes, Doctor," said Henry, in a whisper. For some minutes then he spoke, his voice at a dead level, his eyes unnaturally bright. He said what he had to say plainly, but toward the end he was growing angry, as if his recital had finally convinced him that it was hopeless.

". . . I can't prove most of this. Phoebe was in a faint. This other girl, Diana, who was with Bullwinkle, and disappeared . . . If she could be found, she'd testify I had nothing to do with Bullwinkle's accident. I must've been a couple of miles away when it happened."

"Because your taxicab was flying," the Doctor nodded.

"Yes," said Henry wearily, "I remember I lost him at the Freeport cut-off . . . I was waiting for him . . ." His voice died and suddenly he looked up sharply and asked, "Dr. Drimmler, what time did the storm begin?"

"Why do you ask, Henry?"

"Because I remember hearing the courthouse chimes. I couldn't count them, so I don't know what

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hour they struck, but the storm began about two or three minutes later."

"It was shortly after nine o'clock."

"All right, Doctor! Bullwinkle's car crashed near the cut-off. It's still there, almost fifteen miles away. Now check up on the time the hospital entered Bullwinkle. It couldn't have been more than ten minutes past nine — so how do you explain my getting Bullwinkle here, from fifteen miles away, in six or seven minutes?" He sat triumphantly, staring at the Doctor.

"But you see, Henry," said Dr. Drimmler gently, "this depends on your claim that you were fifteen miles away when you heard the hour being struck . . . Never mind, we'll claim it; it can't hurt."

"One thing more," said Henry. "I still have those love letters."

"*Those* love letters, so? Where do you have them?"

"In my pajamas pocket, under this strait jacket."

"And you want me to unfasten the strait jacket?" The Doctor let a sigh go and shook his head. "Henry, I'm sorry," he began, but there was a knock on the door and he went to open it.

It was the glandular man and the dietician. "We heard talking."

"Yes," said Dr. Drimmler. "Is there any word from Surgery?"

"Only that the boy requires further transfusions. They can't understand how he didn't bleed to death from his wounds. Apparently he was fortunate the accident didn't happen too far from the hospital."

". . . Yes," said Dr. Drimmler slowly. "Thank you, gentlemen."

He closed the door and turned around and looked at Henry for a long, long, intolerable minute. Then he went out.

When Dr. Drimmler returned, his face was ashen. Without a word he went to Henry and began unfastening the strait jacket. As Henry's arms came loose, a packet of letters fell out from his pajama coat. The Doctor picked them up. They were a sodden, inky, pulpy mass, but the Doctor was not disappointed. He put them into a small bag and began to massage Henry's arms.

"Listen carefully," he said in a hushed voice. "We have only a minute before they post armed guards here. George Bullwinkle is sinking fast. The hospital is almost out of his blood type. The nearest available supply is at Glen Falls. That's thirty-five miles from here, and the roads and most of the bridges on the way are washed out. Can you fly your taxicab there and back?"

"I don't know."

"Will you try?"

"Of course I'll try. Where is my cab now?"

"Come with me. It's still out in

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the yard where you left it."

"But how —"

"Shut up!" said Dr. Drimmler impatiently. "Do you expect me to climb down the wall with you? You act as if you'd never heard of a laundry chute."

Here, as it happens, our story ends.

"One can ruminate endlessly about such matters," is what Dr. Drimmler says, "but those who are interested will find everything set down in the history I am writing. The known facts, certainly, are very intriguing.

"Let us take, for example, the identity of Henry Thistle's next door hospital neighbor. We know he was registered as Mr. Safunu — a strange name, which someone has pointed out, is an anagram of the word *Faunus*. We know also that he wore his shoes all the time he was in bed, refusing to let either doctors or nurses to look at his feet. We know also that he was admitted to the hospital as the result of being wounded — is this not strange? — by an arrow.

"We know also that the name Diana has certain mythological references to a goddess who hunted with bow and arrow. In mythology, the brother of Diana is Apollo, and Apollo was the owner of chariots that outraced the sun. Interesting, is it not?

"And for those who care to pursue these researches, it should be pointed out that the god Pan, also called Faunus, was happiest of all in an ancient haunt of his called Arcadia. A nice coincidence.

"Yet all this means nothing, unless it is remembered that Henry Thistle did get to Glen Falls and back in half an hour, which undoubtedly saved George Bullwinkle's life. To support this we have signed affidavits from various hospital officials, from the Mayor, from ex-Constable Crouch, and of course, from me.

"Other testimony is available also from Mrs. Phoebe Thistle.

"Still more testimony, of another sort, may be had from the great philatelic houses that have since bought several of Henry Thistle's extremely rare and valuable stamps — stamps which I can identify as having been on the letters, the love letters, that figure in the story. These ancient stamps, some of them two hundred years old, are worth looking at, and lend great dignity to Miss Lucy Thistle's Antique Shop.

"It is unfortunate, perhaps, that the taxicab itself disappeared during the following night, and has never been seen — except, of course, by those who claim they have glimpsed it when the moon is new and there are rain clouds. The sheep and goats on the seats . . . well, who can say? . . .

"But an old model T Ford? Nonsense. It was not a Ford at all . . ."

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Mr. Dittman's Monsters

BY WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

Did you ever wonder where pink elephants come from? Out of a scotch bottle? Not necessarily, as Arthur Dittman discovered when an uninvited guest showed up. But Arthur wasn't a very enthusiastic host because he already had a monster of his own.

MRS. DITTMAN glared across the table, and voiced the age-old plaint of neglected wives. "I'd think you could give me a little attention once in a while. Always with your nose in that silly *Chemist's Monthly!*"

Mr. Dittman looked up also. In fact, both of him raised a single head, because there were really two Arthur Dittman's. The reasoning man, and the patient little sufferer. The reasoning Dittman was surprised. He could not imagine how anyone so gross, homely, and plain stinkerish as Mrs. Dittman could expect attention from anyone.

Aside from a certain fascination Mr. Dittman had experienced from watching the movement of Mrs. Dittman's mustache, he had never had any great interest in the woman.

Why he had married Martha, Arthur could never really say. The proposal was made in a dark room — a setting arranged beforehand by Martha's frantic parents — and Arthur always suspected that the perfume was drugged.

But he took his defeat like a true sportsman. A bookkeeper by profession, his great love was chemistry. So, what with his patient nature and his basement laboratory, he survived.

"Arthur, answer me!" Martha Dittman barked, whereupon the patient Mr. Dittman took over. He said, "Sorry, my dear. There are some new formulae here that are very interesting. Coupled with the material I found in that old parchment volume —"

"You mean that witch's book? I told you to burn it!"

"But my dear. It contains information of great value!"

"Well, *I'll* burn it. Someday

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I'll go into that abominable laboratory of yours and —"

"My dear — I'm sure you wouldn't do a thing like that. You know what pleasure I derive from —"

"I know it's making a widow out of me!"

It's probably keeping you out of the divorce court, Madam, the reasoning Mr. Dittman said, but silently of course. *Extreme ugliness is grounds for escaping military duty. Why not grounds for divorce? If I told them how unpleasant it is to lie in bed beside —*

"I suppose you're going to spend the whole evening there, as usual?"

"Well — I have plans for a couple of new mixtures."

Mrs. Dittman glowered, and her husband thought, *if only her personality did not match her general unsightliness so perfectly. Why must her disposition wear a mustache also?*

Mr. Dittman got up from the table and smiled at his wife — this in itself being no small feat — and said, "I won't be long, my dear. Just a couple of mixtures."

"I'll keep reminding you," Martha said, darkly. And he knew she would. By knocking on the door every ten minutes in order to break his solitary pleasure into small chunks rather than allow it to flourish uninterrupted for a whole evening.

Safe at last behind the door of his beloved laboratory, a change came over Arthur Dittman; a change for the better. He smiled a smile of contentment that seemed to smooth the wrinkles away from his eyes — wrinkles acquired through the years from squinting against the expected shock of Martha's image against his unprotected optic nerves. Even the sagging flesh of his jowls seemed to tighten; flesh made heavy by the weight of his eternal patience. There was new spring in footsteps understandably reduced to a shuffle by the mere contemplation of the years ahead with Martha.

Arthur went happily to work, his love of it made audible by snatches of conversation he tossed from one side of his mouth to the other. "I could never understand why they left the catylitic element out of that formula. Perhaps they didn't have a name for it in 1281. That was a long time ago. Hmmmmm. Let's see now — ground bat's ears. This synthetic should certainly do just as well. And why shouldn't a compound of digitalis and riboflavin activate the formula if anything will. I wonder —"

Arthur chatted happily with himself and went about mixing concoctions that might have been termed devilish by those wishing to put a melodramic connotation upon plain, unromantic chemicals.

Finally, Arthur was ready to

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complete his experiment. He put on his rubber gloves, turned his face away, and added the last ingredient.

Thirty silent seconds passed, while the retort seemed to be tasting the stuff suspiciously. Then it belched and spewed forth like someone who had just discovered a raw oyster in a slice of angel food cake.

The room filled, instantly, with a cloud of smoke — white, slightly odorous — exactly as prescribed for such occasions by specialists in such matters and by all the old books.

Arthur Dittman cowered in a corner, and rubbed his smarting eyes. This didn't help much because there was some sort of caustic substance on the rubber gloves which left his optics positively streaming.

Then a soft, wistful voice said, "Hello."

Arthur finally got his eyes open and found the room to be clearing fast but he still couldn't see anything. He said, "Hello," also, but mainly from reflex action.

"You're sad," the wistful voice said. "You've been crying."

"I assure you, it's entirely chemical — not emotional."

"Emotion — chemistry — biology," the sad voice pursued, "they're all hopelessly intermingled."

"I — I suppose you're right, but —" Arthur's eyes were beginning to function again and he could vaguely define a large, wavering blob of matter near the Bunsen burner. He said, "I — ah, didn't hear you enter."

"I'm sorry — I thought you knew. You were kind enough to bring me here."

At that moment there was a sharp knock on the door, followed by Martha's strident voice. "Arthur! You're smelling up the house again. Whatever you're doing — stop it!"

"I'm sorry, my dear. The experiment is over now."

"And a very successful one," the wistful voice stated.

"What did you say?" Martha wanted to know.

"I said the experiment is over."

"Well, I don't care whether it was a success or not. Stop it!"

"Martha — I wish you'd come in and see —"

"Come in? You couldn't drag me into that filthy place!"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't try anything so drastic, but —"

"Just get rid of that awful smell and come to bed."

"Who's that?" the nice voice asked, as Martha strode off upstairs.

"My wife. She isn't in sympathy with my hobby."

"Well, I'm certainly in sympathy with it. You've given me my first taste of freedom in a long time."

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"Is that so? Well I'm very glad —" The room was clear, now and Arthur's eyes were functioning — functioning almost too well, he thought, as he beheld the apparition that had moved in on him. Something the like of which had never before visited him.

It had stringy hair, wore a small postage stamp of an apron, and was clad mainly in vari-colored scales. The arms, legs, and torso appeared to have been assembled toward the end of a long day in a factory where the employees kept their eyes glued to the clock after four-thirty — a slipshod job that no inspector would have ever passed except one who was also watching the clock. Certainly, there was no pride of workmanship in whoever had thrown this

"Spring positively does something to me, Miss Gorkle."

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one together. None whatever.

But Arthur Dittman was instinctively kind, and except for the sudden break in his words, he gave no sign of personal shock.

The apparition was observant, however. "You don't like me."

"Oh — on the contrary. I was just — ah, startled. What are you — a genie of some sort?"

"You mean can I grant you a wish?"

"Three wishes is usually the accepted form."

"I'm sorry. None of us ever had any such power. The old-story tellers and myth-makers were, first of all — human beings, and were inclined to color things up a little." The monster's sadness increased. "As a matter of cold fact, we aren't good for anything I can think of."

Arthur Dittman, conditioned as he was to unusual physical contours, stepped closer to his visitor and studied the face. "That — ah, is your face, isn't it?" he asked.

"Of course. Isn't it where faces usually are?"

The visage did have redeeming features, Arthur thought. The surrounding wattles were a delicate pink, and the irises of the eyes were arresting in their lavender brightness. "I still don't see how I achieved —"

"It may surprise you, but the key ingredient of your chemical formula was the alcohol."

"Is that so? You surprise me."

The monster sighed. "I was fortunate in materializing for a scientist."

"An amateur," Arthur said, but blushed with pleasure, nonetheless.

"A man with the impersonal scientific approach, regardless. Usually we're given a pretty bad time by the people who materialize us. They scream, dive under the bed, try to climb up the wall."

Arthur was puzzled. "Why should they do that?"

"It's just that very few of them expect us. Although how they can expect anything else after —"

Arthur Dittman pointed suddenly. "Wait a minute. It occurs to me — You mean it doesn't matter how or where the formula is concocted?"

"None whatever."

"It could be in a man's stomach or in a retort?"

"It could be anywhere."

"And when you come you often find your host in — ah, very bad shape?"

"We usually find them drunker than fifty tankards of ale."

"Then you're wrong — you're very wrong about being useless and having no purpose in the scheme of things. Obviously you are manifested on this plane to show people the error of their ways!"

The creature shrugged. "That

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may be true, but it's a sad, thankless job anyhow. Always misunderstood and goggled at — when all we want is a little kindness — a little consideration —"

"Are there — very many of you?"

"Oh yes — quite a number. We take turns in coming. Always hoping against hope that the next trip will be different — that our host won't go into a coma or jump out a window, or call for help."

"Well, I certainly don't want to seem boorish. Possibly we could sit and chat a while. You could tell me about your world and —"

There was a sudden banging on the door. Martha's voice. "Arthur? Have you got a woman in there?"

Arthur flinched at the sound. The monster asked, "Who's that?"

"My wife."

"Arthur! Answer me!"

Mr. Dittman glanced, somewhat perplexed, at his visitor. "Are you a — ah, that is — a lady?"

The rose wattles deepened in color. "Why, yes. My name is Elizabeth. I chose it myself."

Arthur looked at the door and called, "I'm occupied at the moment, my dear. If you'll come back a little later —"

Martha's snort of indignation could easily have blown the door open if she had not already thrown her weight against it. The panel flew back and she came into the laboratory. She took two steps forward and came to an abrupt halt. She loosed one inarticulate scream and fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Arthur moved toward her. A second gargled scream stopped him. He turned. Elizabeth was also stretched on the floor, out cold from sudden shock.

Arthur was filled with an understandable confusion. His loyalties of course were toward Martha, but the scientist in him forced his attention in the other direction. He knelt beside his fallen visitor and observed her complexion. It was only faintly pink. Obviously her reaction to sudden fright differed little from that of a human.

But her recuperative powers were greater and she opened her eyes almost immediately. "Good heavens," she muttered. "What was that?"

"My wife," Arthur said a little stiffly.

"I'm sorry. It was just that —"

"I understand. Are you feeling better now?"

"I'll be all right. It was just the sudden shock. But it did me good. It did me a great deal of good."

Elizabeth got to her feet and studied the still-prone Martha. "It just goes to show that there is good in everything. When we're put in a position where we can understand how the other fellow feels —"

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"I don't think I quite follow you."

"It's just that one illustration — one experience — is worth a thousand words."

"Can't you make it a little clearer?"

"It's quite apparent. For years, I've been feeling bad when I materialize to the formula and see some wild-eyed human take one look at me and try to crawl into the woodwork. But now I'll understand. Now I've been on the receiving end. Now I know what it's like to have a monster come thundering toward me when I'm not prepared. I reacted just as they do. In the future I'll understand and have more charity."

"Then your trip wasn't wasted."

"No indeed. I'll return with a lighter heart. If your wife can live with that face, I can certainly — oh, I'm sorry! That was boorish of me."

"It's all right. I know you were speaking impersonally."

"Thank you. And now I must get back. It's been pleasant — very pleasant."

Arthur watched Elizabeth with marked interest. "I'm sorry you have to leave, but I'll be very interested in seeing how you do it."

Elizabeth almost smiled. "Always the scientist. It's very simple, really. All I do is relax."

She proceeded to demonstrate, loosening her muscles, sinking gently to the floor, and finally becoming a blob of protoplasm that turned transparent and vanished.

Martha stirred and opened her eyes. They focused groggily as she sat up. "Is — is she gone?"

"Yes."

Martha got slowly to her feet. A change had come over her; a new soberness; a fear. She said, "Arthur — dear. I — I didn't realize I'd driven you so far."

"Driven me?"

"I know I've been disagreeable — that I've been selfish — but I didn't realize —"

"Realize what, Martha?"

"That you were looking elsewhere for feminine companionship."

Arthur's eyes popped. "But you fainted, woman! Are you trying to tell me that — ?"

"It was the shock of realizing the truth. I didn't think you'd really do it. I guess I was too sure of myself, darling. But when I saw her, it floored me. Another woman! Here in our house!"

Arthur Dittman looked a trifle dazed. "I guess it's all in the point of view," he mused.

"Arthur, I'll make it up to you. If you'll give me a chance —"

He looked at his wife and smiled. After all — with the mustache shaved off her personality — He said, "It's all right, dear. I'll brush up the laboratory and then we'll go to bed."

And, strangely enough, the prospect seemed almost pleasant

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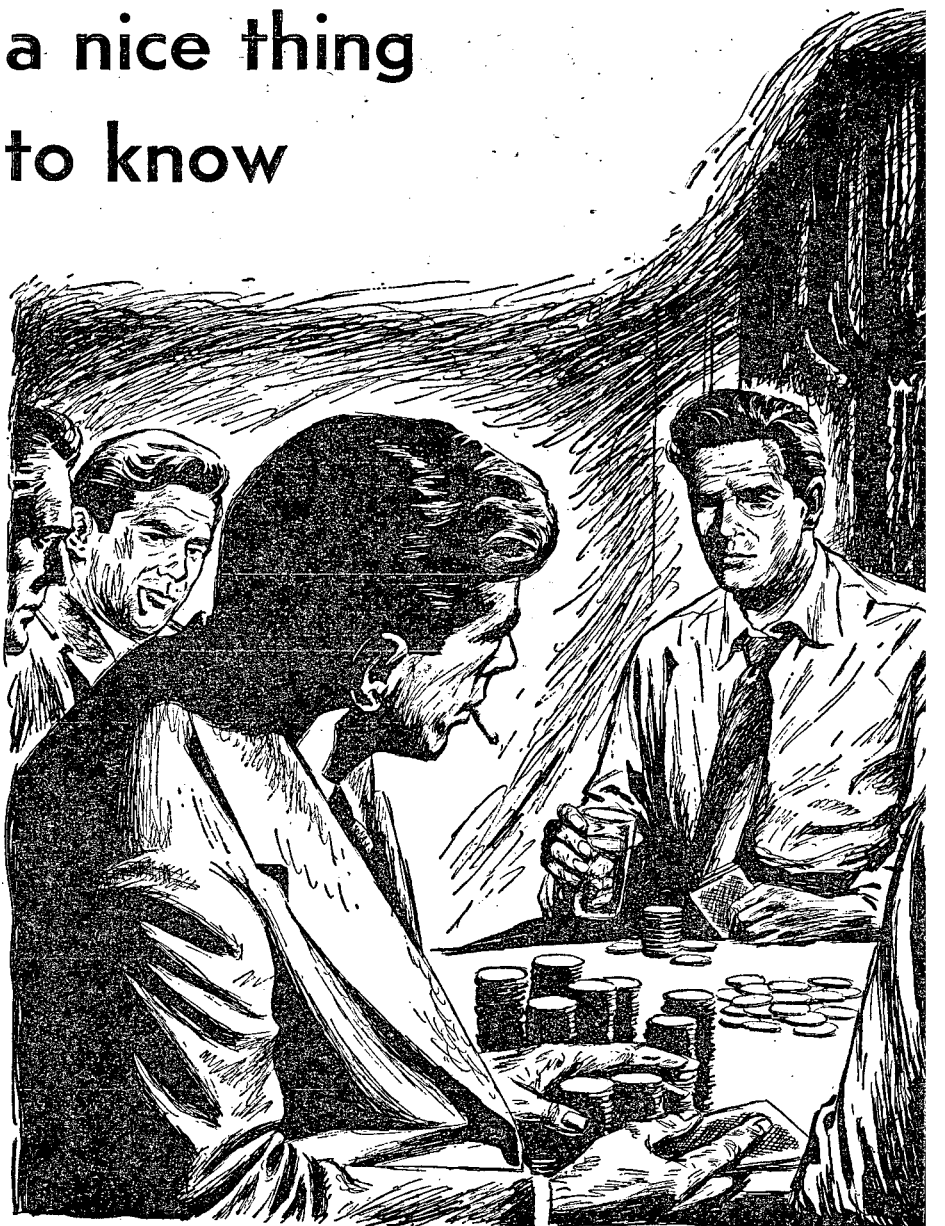
a nice thing to know



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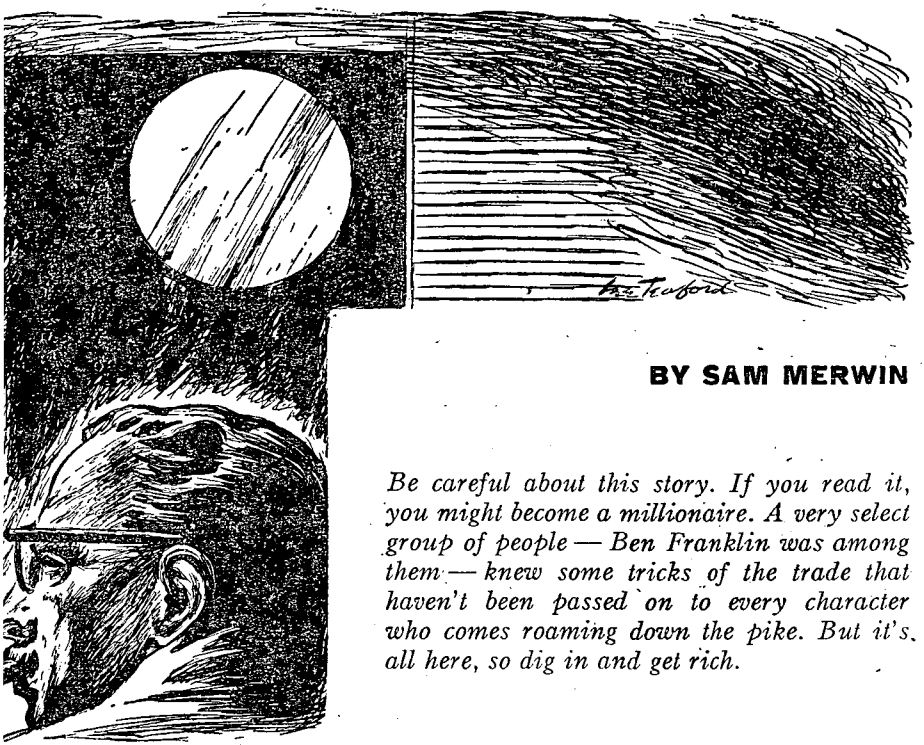
Illustrator: Lee Teaford



BY SAM MERWIN

Be careful about this story. If you read it, you might become a millionaire. A very select group of people — Ben Franklin was among them — knew some tricks of the trade that haven't been passed on to every character who comes roaming down the pike. But it's all here, so dig in and get rich.

SHE wore her ugliness like a tiara. In the blue-glass dimness of the hotel barroom, she represented an open challenge to the uniform comeliness of the ladies of pleasure seated on the barstools or scattered with their men at the midnight tables. An alert intelligent good-humored challenge they could not hope to meet.

She took the stool next to Johnny Orlando and said, "What are you drinking?" They were the first words she had spoken to him.

He looked at her with outward somberness, masking the answering humor he felt. "You wouldn't like it," he told her. "It's seltzer — alka variety."

She ordered a scotch mist from Tom Wilson, the bartender. She said, "Big one tonight?"

He nodded — after all, gambling was legal in Nevada. He said, "Real big."

She hesitated, not at a loss for words but taking time to select the words she wished. She said, "I'm Nancy McColl."

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He said, "I know — and I'm Johnny Orlando."

She sipped her drink and looked at him over the rim of the broad low glass. She had a broad low face that reminded him of a bulldog. She said, "What do you know about gambling, Johnny?"

He said, "What do you know about law, Nancy?" She was, as Johnny and a great many others knew, perhaps the most successful woman attorney in the United States, with the possible exception of Fanny Holtzman.

She smiled and she wasn't ugly. She said, "Everything I can manage to find out."

He said, "Well . . . ?"

She said, "What about Gerolamo Cardano?"

He said, "Cardano's been dead almost four hundred years. What about him?"

She moved her glass back and forth on the ebony surface. She said, "He was a great gambler, Johnny — he was way ahead of his time."

He said, "Cardano was a primitive. He died broke."

She said, "He pioneered discovery of the laws of probability."

He said, "But he didn't know enough. If he hadn't had that medicine kick going for him he'd never have got a stake."

She said, "You called him a primitive. You're right — but if you've studied his works you respect him."

"Sure I respect him." Johnny wasn't annoyed, merely puzzled. "But he was a jerk. He thought he got luck by facing a rapidly rising moon when he played."

Her reply was almost a whisper. She said, "Johnny, the moon rises tonight at twelve forty-six. What time is it now?"

He peered at the platinum dial on his wrist. "Twelve twenty-nine," he said. "Why?"

"What time's your game, Johnny?"

"In about ten minutes," he said. The implications suddenly sank home. He pushed his near-empty glass of alka-seltzer away, slipped off the stool. He said, "Good-night, Miss McColl."

She said, "You might give it a try — if you can face the moon."

He could hear the driving beat of the dance orchestra playing in the Desert Room as he crossed the lobby to the elevators. The second show would be coming on in a few minutes. This time he wouldn't be able to catch Linda's song-and-dance act. He let his glance linger on the live-size blowup of Linda by the elevators — Linda wearing glittering black sequin bolero and skintight shorts, with black lace stockings that made her look incredibly long-legged. He thought, with a trace of regret, *Business before pleasure* . . .

Markheim had rented the penthouse for the game. It was going

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to be Markheim and his syndicate against Johnny Orlando and his rich tough little group of Eastern millionaire backers. Actually, if things went by the book, there would be little exchange of funds between Markheim and Johnny. It would be the others, the suckers, the Texas oilmen and Hollywood doughboys, who would be paying off. They didn't mind dropping a few tens of thousands now and then, just to be able to say they'd had a seat in the big game. They gloried in their losses, magnified them, heavy as they were.

And Markheim and his syndicate, or Johnny and his backers, got richer off them. Not that there was anything crooked about it — the others just weren't good enough, barring runs of luck.

It was Johnny's purpose in life to break Markheim's syndicate — just as it was Markheim's to bust Johnny's backers. On a small scale it was like the world picture — with Russia and America, each too powerful to whip the other, waiting for an inner crackup while the lesser elements in the game, the neutrals, got crushed between them.

Markheim wore chartreuse slacks and a pale lavender silk sports shirt and a cummerbund that looked dazzle-painted. His face was a smooth healthy tan, thanks to masseur and sunlamp, and his teeth were his own. He weighed close to three hundred pounds and liked to show them. He said, "Jesus, Johnny, if I didn't have this game going you'd never of let that broad of yours out of the hay enough to make her shows."

From Markheim, that was polite amiability. Johnny replied in kind. He said, "At least I've got a broad, Mickey. I don't spend all my spare time cheating myself at solitaire."

It got a laugh — more of a laugh than it rated. Markheim threw a fat, surprisingly muscular arm across Johnny's shoulders and chuckled and said, "That's my boy!" Johnny could almost feel the hate oozing out of his pores.

They moved out onto a glassed-in porch, where the table was set up. It looked east over the desert and Johnny could see a lemon-sherbet streak at the foot of the sky where the moon was struggling to rise. He felt a sudden shaft of something like fear. How had that lawyer-woman known he'd even be able to see the moon? Was she part of some deal setting him up for a Patsy?

All right, he thought, *I'm warned.* Seven in the game — but only two who counted. Himself and Markheim. Feeling like a small boy making a gesture of defiance, Johnny took the seat that faced the moon. The game was five-card stud.

Ninety-seven minutes later, he

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was one hundred seventy-seven thousand dollars ahead. If he had felt able to trust his luck entirely the score might have been a cool quarter million. And all but sixty-two thousand of it was Markheim's syndicate money. It was incredible — he had taken ridiculous chances, testing his luck, and all of them had paid off.

But Cardano, the great sixteenth-century scientist gambler, died broke. It didn't make sense.

Markheim's smile looked as if it were propped up with toothpicks. He said, "Maybe we better change seats."

"Okay by me," said Johnny. He wanted to see what would happen when he wasn't facing the moon. But the moon was already high in the night-sky, on the verge of disappearing above the penthouse roof. The Hollywood character who got his seat had only average luck the rest of the night.

So did Johnny. He played them close to his vest and when they broke it up at breakfast time he was only a hundred fifty thousand ahead. Markheim, grey under his tan, punched him in the kidneys when he left. "Talk about the luck of the devil," he said. "I'll give odds your broad's been cheating on you tonight."

"Johnny should worry," said one of the Texans. "For a hundred and fifty gees he can buy himself a harem and five big ranches."

Johnny put his winnings in two envelopes at the desk — thirty thousand for himself, a hundred twenty for his backers — and had the night manager stash them in the hotel safe. It had been a big night, a real big night, the biggest he'd ever had. But he wasn't happy about it.

He went up to his rooms on the seventh floor. Linda was waiting for him, huddled in a corner of the living room sofa, asleep. With her blue-black hair feather-cut around her soft young features, she might have been a little girl. He picked her up — she was light in his arms — and took off her robe and stretched her out on the satin spread. Her arms went around his neck and she kissed him but her eyes remained tightly closed. The gold chain with the gold cross she wore about her neck was dark against the whiteness of her skin.

Johnny was too nervous, too worried, too highly keyed, to feel sleepy. He stripped, took a long shower, got into sports clothes. He looked at his watch — it was almost nine o'clock. On impulse he moved to the living room telephone, called Nancy McColl's room. She said, "It went all right, didn't it, Johnny?"

He said, "Have breakfast with me downstairs in fifteen minutes."

She looked even uglier than the night before — and even more attractive — as she joined him on the flagged terrace overlooking

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the swimming pool, which the hotel used to serve breakfast and lunch. She was, he decided errantly, the living embodiment of the triumph of character over a face.

When they had ordered, he said, "Two questions, Nancy."

Her expression was enigmatic, yet he sensed a hopefulness in her low-pitched voice as she said, "All right."

"The first is, why," he told her.

"Why did I manage your run of luck?" she countered with the ghost of a smile. "It's a long story, Johnny. Answer a question for me first. What do you believe in?"

He regarded her for a long moment. Then, "I don't know. Not much, I guess. Until last night I believed in the laws of probability. I've built my life on them, just as you've built yours on the laws of society. After last night . . ." He shrugged wearily.

"No religion? No blood ties? No inherent obligations?" Her voice was guileless.

"You may not believe this," he told her, "but I was on my way to a Phi Beta key at college until the dean booted me out for making expenses gambling. I'm damnnear educated — I read. I know about religion — a little about all of them, I guess. My Old Man was a promoter. He kept the fortunes and stepmothers coming and going so fast I never had a chance to latch onto any of them. He was a good Joe, though — he could talk more racing than any man I ever met. I still miss him." He paused, realized he was talking too much, said, "No religion, no blood ties — no *inherent* obligations."

"What about the little dancing girl?" Nancy asked.

He looked at her, wondering what business it was of hers. Then he found himself saying, "Linda's the daughter of an old friend of mine who got a rough break. I paid for some of her schooling. I never figured it would work out this way."

"Going to marry the girl?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Maybe, when she outgrows me, she'll be ready for some boy who can give her a real break. Now — how about answering *my* question. *Why?*"

"Because there aren't many like us," she told him quietly. "Most people are caught at birth — caught in a web of possessiveness, one way or another, that makes them blind. Pre-arranged love — motherlove, fatherlove, other loves that teach us certain wholly man-made things are sacred."

"I've seen similar things," he said.

"You're wondering what this has to do with last night," she told him. "I've been watching you here this past week — I'd heard of you, naturally. You're a pretty famous guy in your way, Johnny. I got an idea you were an intel-

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ligent man — really intelligent."

"Thanks," he said, wondering why he was interested. "I think you're gorgeous yourself."

"I'm in deadly earnest," she said, unsmiling. "No man or woman can be truly intelligent until he or she starts from scratch, without any built-in predigested beliefs. What did you believe in last night — and what do you believe in now?"

He said, "Last night I believed in the laws of probability. But if you or anyone else can kick them around . . ." He shrugged.

"Most of us have an odd trick or two once we get rid of our blind spots," she said quietly. "Me, I'm telekinetic. I can control material things, even move them around, at a distance."

"No wonder you win your cases," he said with a trace of scorn. "You must be able to foul up a lot of evidence."

She looked hurt, a little shocked. "But I couldn't," she said. "I play by the rules."

He said, "You'd have a hell of a time convincing Markheim of that, Nancy. If he ever finds out . . ."

"He won't unless you tell him," she replied.

Johnny didn't even bother to answer. He said, "You just answered my second question — how — but you haven't answered the first. What's your motive in destroying my belief in the laws of probability?"

"Need is my motive — desperate need," she told him. "Johnny, a long time ago a man named Charles Fort wrote a book in which he insisted this earth of ours was the property of some alien being or beings. He was an eccentric — a screwball — but he was partly right. We *are* property, held in thrall by some force which has employed our instincts to chain us."

"You might have something there," he agreed. Then, with a frown, "But where does this alien control come in — and why?" He wondered if Nancy McColl weren't insane.

She said, "Oh, it's real — I'm afraid you'll find out soon enough. They don't like free souls. They take action against them."

"All right," he said. He decided to humor her. "Supposing you're correct and I'm an enlightened being — what do I do about it? And about them?"

"You look for others and find them, as I've found you, Johnny," she said quietly. "Remember, you're an outlaw. You're one of the feared ones — or you will be. You're a lone wolf, operating outside of the pack. You'll have to watch your step and do what little you can. We can't all be Voltaires — or Franklins. You can always get in touch with me."

He took a forkful of eggs, said,

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"Dammit, these need more salt." The salt cellar moved toward him, across the table, untouched. He looked at Nancy McColl before he picked it up. He shivered.

Later he went back to the seventh floor. Linda was still asleep and he lay down and tried to rest. After awhile he got up and into his trunks and went downstairs for a dip in the pool. Word of his killing had got around by then — some of the Texans or Hollywood characters must have been talking. He was a great man — for the moment.

When he got upstairs again, Linda was up, tousled and lovely and conscience stricken. She said, "Darling, I was naughty last night. I got lonesome after the show and played roulette. I lost a lot of money."

He said, "How much, baby?"

She pouted and drew a line in the carpet with the inner edge of her slipper. She said, "Almost six hundred dollars." She looked completely adorable.

He gave her a thousand. He said, "If I ever hear of you doing it again I'll take a paddle to you. I'm not fooling."

She pulled her face away from his and saw he meant it. Hurt, she said, "But what right have you, of all people . . . ?"

"I just quit," he said. "I'm through. I'm never going to gamble again." And, as he said it, he realized he was telling the truth. If someone like Nancy McColl could kick the laws of probability around as she had the night before, there was no point in going on.

He sat down and wrote six letters — five to his backers, one to Markheim. He wasn't worried about his backers. Not with the payment he had for them in the safe. He wasn't worried about himself. Not with the stake he now had. Markheim — well, Markheim and his syndicate could stuff the proverbial duck.

Finished, he said to Linda, curled up in a chair with orange stick and buffer, "From now on we go dancing after the show. You won't have to be bored — just stepped on."

Linda tossed the manicuring tools in the air and did a high kick. She said, "Darling, you don't know how lonely I've been!"

"Them days is over, baby," he told her, reaching for her.

Later, he drove her across the desert resort to a dance studio, where Linda had a practice period to spend. The kid worked hard, he thought, idly tooling his big convertible along one of the unpaved roads beyond the outskirts of town. When she was fully grown up, a three-dimensional woman, she would already be solidly established talent. She would never go hungry — he had already seen to that.

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He drove up into the foothills, past a sagging ghost-ranch, a casualty of the Great Drought of the early Thirties. For some reason, the eerieness of the deserted ruin reminded him of Nancy McColl and the strange bill of goods she had tried to sell him. He shuddered although the day was warm.

The woman must be out of her mind, he decided, famous lawyer or not. And yet — there was that business of the cards the night before. It could have been coincidence, of course. But his trained gambler's mind refused to accept it. On the whole he was glad he had finished with that phase of his career. He imagined what Markheim was calling him just then — and smiled to himself. It would be the first time in decades, to Johnny's certain knowledge, that the big syndicate gambler had ever come out a permanent loser to anyone.

If Nancy McColl ever talked to anyone else as she had talked to him that morning — and if Markheim ever got wind of it — she would need more than words to get out of it. He wondered a little at her special gift. Telekineses, was it? He wondered if he had any special powers. A free soul—property—outside the pack.

His comment was crisp.

He found himself approaching a turnaround spot, well up in the hills, overlooking a panorama of the valley in twilight. Lights were beginning to dot the anachronism of the city with orange punctuation points. The city — town rather — with its low houses and outbuildings, its copse of hotel towers. Against the flat sweep of the desert, it might have been a toytown, built by a child with his blocks in the center of some vast playground floor.

Built by men and women with love and obligations to fulfill — built to fulfill these obligations. Johnny decided again that the lawyer woman was crazy. He felt his breast pocket, heard the reassuring crinkle of the envelopes, thanked Allah he hadn't mailed them. Nancy McColl, along with her reputation for legal shrewdness, had a name for not being over-particular about the clients she accepted. He began to get a new aspect toward recent events.

The syndicate — Mickey Markheim's syndicate—must have hired her to get him — Johnny Orlando — out of the big game for keeps. They would certainly be willing to pay big money to do it, since with himself gone Mickey would pick up all the blue chips. Thus viewed, the strange current of the game the night before lost its magical angle. As for the salt-cellar at breakfast — that could easily have been gimmicked.

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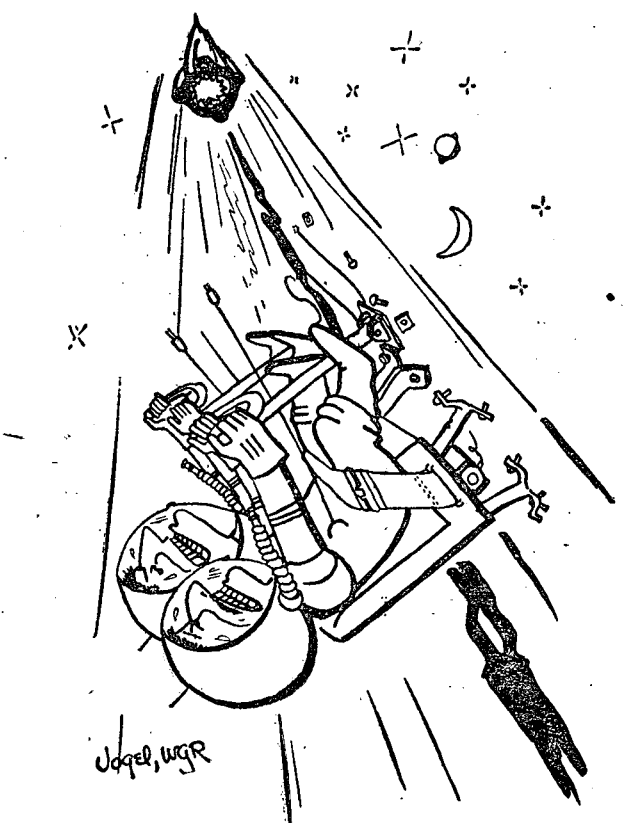
Johnny put his big car in gear again, turned around and drove back down the winding dusty road through the foothills. He picked up Linda and drove her back to the hotel.

They had an early dinner together on the terrace overlooking the pool. It was a fairyland in the soft flattering early-evening darkness — man-made, expensive, but at least as authentic as the fairylands of the Assassins, from which the leaders of that Near-Eastern Murder Incorporated sent its drugged agents, only too happy to die in the course of their lethal assignments for a return ticket.

Linda's dark eyes were dancing. She said, "Johnny, I'm so glad you've decided to quit. We can dance all night — between shows."



"Quick, Chauncey! The pilots' manual!"

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"Tomorrow night," he told her. "I've got a few loose ends to wrap up first."

She looked like a child whose ice-cream cone had fallen into the mud. She said, "Oh, but Johnny —" Then she accepted it, as she accepted his every decision. She said, "Only tonight?"

He said, "Only tonight. There's one thing I have to be sure of." He gripped a slim young wrist atop the tablecloth, added, "We can really begin our playing tomorrow."

She said, "Of course, Johnny." She sighed and looked sad, but not for long. She looked around at the other tables. "Isn't it exciting — the test and everything?"

He said, "What test, baby?"

She shook her head, playing the reproving mother, said, "Honestly, Johnny, sometimes I think you don't know anything. They're setting off some kind of a new bomb tomorrow morning."

Johnny felt sheepish. He ought to have known about it. He took a very real pride in following world events. He said, "Maybe the concussion will break some of the glass in Markheim's penthouse." It was a stupid remark but all he could think of at the moment. Coming so soon after last night, it made him a little afraid. The Russians had it too. Maybe the end of the world *was* coming close. Maybe Nancy McColl had something after all.

He shut his eyes and counted ten slowly. Then he took a deep breath. The knot of fear untied itself in his diaphragm.

He managed to get in a couple of hours' sleep after dinner. Then he went back to the bar. Tom Wilson said, "The usual, Mr. Orlando?" Johnny yawned widely and nodded.

The barstool beside him was empty. He didn't even look around when Nancy McColl took it. He said, "Hello, Nancy."

She said, "Going to try it again, Johnny?"

He said, "That's right — any suggestions about tonight?"

She said, "Just hold onto your hat, that's all." She was damnably matter of fact, damnably convincing — and damnably unsatisfying.

He said, "Who are you working for, Nancy?"

She said, "Who do you think, Johnny?"

He said, "What do they want me to do?"

She laughed. She said, "I didn't think you'd fall for what I told you this morning. What do we want you to do?" She hesitated and once again he could sense her choosing her words. Only this time it didn't seem to him she was thinking as a lawyer. She seemed more like somebody picking the words she wanted in a foreign language.

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"What do we want you to do?" she repeated. "You know a lot of big people, Johnny — people with influence. In your way, you're important to a lot of them. They'll listen to you because you're Johnny Orlando, the gambler. Most of them, underneath, would give a lot to be you. When *you* get religion, they will too. They'll be easier for us Johnny boy — much easier."

Johnny sighed and said, "What's in it for me?"

She said, "That's my Johnny." She was smiling again. She said, "We pay off — you'll find out. And when the time comes, we'll see you come out of it on top."

He wondered again if she were crazy. He said, "What happens if I don't play?"

She didn't stop smiling. She said, "Johnny, we wouldn't hurt *you*. A few years ago, we wanted help from a famous woman playwright, a woman who had married an immensely powerful publisher. She was a lot like you, Johnny. She didn't think she believed in anything. But when her daughter died in an auto crash, she believed quite spectacularly. A few years before that there was a film star who could help us. He had a beautiful young wife, also a film star. She died in a plane crash. Since then he has proved very useful. And there was —"

"All right," he interrupted. "I'm used to mobsters. If I hadn't known how to handle them since I was a kid, I wouldn't be alive today."

"This is bigger than any mob operation," she told him coolly. Then, after a pause, "You're going to be very lucky tonight — you and the people you like."

He said, "Have your fun. But pick another target."

She shook her head, said pleasantly, "Oh no, Johnny — you're the one we want."

He went up to Markheim's penthouse with a sense of soundless invisible footsteps on his heels. There, in the familiar and plush cutthroat atmosphere, he was able to shake it — until the game began. He was careful not to take a seat facing the rising moon. *Gerolamo Cardano!* he thought. *Gerolamo and Nancy McColl — lunatics!*

Only two of the five suckers of the night before were present. But three new ones had taken the places of the missing losers and, save for these substitutions and the different seating, it might almost have been a repetition of the earlier game.

Sensing that his luck was still in, Johnny decided to lean back and let it run for him — with a silent apology to his backers for taking such chances with their money. He picked up another hundred forty thousand in a couple of hours, then dropped forty,

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clean as a knife. He made seventy more, playing like a deliberate idiot, then dropped twenty. The percentages were too pat. He knew now that the cards were being controlled.

He also knew they were not being controlled by anyone in the game — he was much too experienced a gambler not to have spotted any snide moves. And he knew he himself was making none.

Markheim wasn't so sure. His deceptively gentle grey eyes watched every move Johnny made. And when Johnny decided to quit, he said, "Maybe you'd better take a vacation, Johnny. Maybe your luck is a little too rich for my blood."

"Maybe it's a little too rich for mine too," said Johnny. He made an amateur's suggestion, "Want to try double or nothing, just between us, on a last draw?"

Markheim began to sweat as desire and fright made a mask of his round face. He caught the lighted half of his cigar as it fell from his lips, dropped it into an ashtray with a curse, removed the bitten-through butt from his teeth. He mopped his brow with a cerise silk handkerchief. Then he shook his head.

"You better get back to your broad," he said.

Linda was not asleep this morning when he returned from making his deposits at the desk downstairs. She was aburst with life, with a vibrant excitement that made him feel even more drained and empty by contrast. The words came tumbling from her lips.

"Johnny — guess what? Greg Ohman—*the* Greg Ohman—caught my act at both shows tonight. He wants me for a part in the new three-D musical at Colossal, a small part with a big appeal. I thought you'd *never* get back, darling. He's flying me to Hollywood in his private plane at seven this morning, so I can rehearse today and test tomorrow and be back here tomorrow night for my shows. The management says it's okay. Isn't that terrific, darling?"

Johnny sat down hard and Linda, with a dancer's pirouette, flew lightly into his lap and kissed him. "Say you think it's terrific too, darling," she whispered urgently.

"Terrific?" he countered. "Sure I think it's terrific." He almost said "terrifying." It *was* terrifying. He looked up at Linda and all at once he knew they had him. He thought of the playwright's daughter and the actor's wife and he knew what they must have felt, what they must still be feeling. He wondered what form his own dictated conversion was going to take.

He said, "Let's go for a drive first. I'd like some fresh air —

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and I'd like to be with you while we can."

"But I'll be back tomorrow night, Johnny."

He said, "Sure — you'll be back."

She said fiercely, "And nothing between us is going to change — I won't *let* it change."

He said, "You're still a kid, baby — but I love you very much."

"Johnny!" she exclaimed. "You never really said that before." There were near-tears in her dark eyes.

He said, "Guess I never dared admit it to myself before."

She said, "You wonderful idiot, Johnny."

He said, "I'll go with you on the idiot part of that. Come on, let's take that drive."

There were a number of cars, almost amounting to traffic, on the deserted mountain road of the evening before. Some were gleaming new convertibles that matched his own. Others were more usual inverted-bathtub sedans. There was a pickup truck and one ancient Model-A that chugged its way noisily and painfully up the slope.

All of them were full of people, though it was not yet dawn. Johnny thought, *What the hell?* — and then he remembered the test. His first impulse was to turn around and drive somewhere else. His second was to go ahead and see it. To date such abstrusities as A and H-bombs had belonged to another world. They didn't seem to anymore.

The turnaround where he had watched the twilight some twelve hours earlier was packed with cars but Johnny managed to wedge the convertible into a fair spot. He and Linda sat there and smoked and said very little until, behind the lower ridge on the far side of the valley, the fading night sky suddenly bloomed with unearthly brilliance that seemed to take an interminably long time in fading.

He knew it was sixty or more miles away but it seemed appallingly close. After a bit the shock wave struck them a palpable blow and whirled up a small wall of dust about the cars and then came a long low thunderous rumble.

"It's like the *Road to Mandalay*," said Linda. "You know — 'where the dawn comes up like thunder?' "

"I'm going to have to have the car washed," he said. "Come on, let's get out of this. I can get you breakfast at one of these barbecue joints and still get you to the airport in time."

The cloud rose over the other ridge, looking slow and gay and oddly innocent against the dawn sky. It was the double mushroom of the H-bomb, not the single mushroom of the A-bomb. He found himself unable to watch

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it and got busy working the car back onto the road.

Greg Ohman, looking tired, was waiting for Linda when they reached the airport. He and Johnny had known one another casually for years. Teeth flashed in a smile beneath his dark glasses and he said, "Sorry to swipe your girl, Johnny."

"It's all right," said Johnny. "It's fine. A great break for the kid."

"You know, it's crazy," the film producer told him. "Here I'm supposed to be a genius, a great discoverer and developer of new talent. I've knocked myself out trying to find the right girl for this part — while all the time Linda's been operating in plain sight. It's enough to make a fellow doubt he's a genius."

"You think she'll make it?" Johnny asked softly, out of earshot of the girl.

"Christ, not a doubt of it," Ohman told him. "You do things well, Johnny — you trained this one right. She's got it all."

"How'd you happen to spot her?" Johnny asked quietly.

"How do you think?" was the reply. "I got a tip from a mutual friend of ours. She's right over there."

He nodded toward a woman in slacks and sweater and bandanna, who was talking to the pilot of the plane. She turned then and Johnny saw it was Nancy McColl. She came toward them, smiling, and said, "This is swell, Johnny. You can drive me back to the hotel."

He wanted to ask her what she had done to the pilot. The idea of Linda, burned and torn to pieces in a plane crash, was more than he could stomach. She seemed to read his thoughts. When the plane had taken off and they were driving back to the hotel alone together, she said, "Don't worry, Johnny, your Linda will be all right — this time."

"I get it," said Johnny. He thought bitterly, *I'm the guy with no religion, no blood ties, no inherent obligations — the guy who believed only in the laws of chance.*

Again she seemed to read him. She said, "Don't take it so hard, Johnny — you and your Linda will be all right. People like you, who won't admit your beliefs to yourselves, are the people who work best for us. Others respect you and envy you your independence — and when you surrender it they retain their respect and lose their envy. You're the important ones, the ones we need."

"Thanks," said Johnny. Thanks very much." He wondered what Nancy really was, what he was going to have to do. What the future held for him. It would be a nice thing to know.

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THE SISTERS

BY GORDON SCHENDEL

Do you remember a radio show — long gone — called "Lights Out"? And there was another eerie little job they named "The Hermit's Cave." Well, if you liked their brand of gleeful ghoulishness, you'll go for this yarn. 'Nough said.

THE big, ugly old house on the edge of town, half hidden by somber blue spruce, was set well back from the road in two acres of weed-grown lawn bounded by a rusting wrought-iron fence. Long ago, the house had been the town showplace and the scene of lavish parties and musicales, but now children walked quickly when they were forced to pass it and virtually no outsider ever entered its sagging scrolled gates.

Twilight was fast blurring the harsh outlines of the tortuous gingerbread fretwork, the shallow false balconies and the octagonal "tower" with its stained-glass windows. It was that stand-still time when the furry daylight creatures have retired and the creatures of darkness have not yet crept out of their holes, from under their rotting logs or up through the green slime of stagnant pools. It was the time, too, when the funereal firs exude their spicy aroma most pungently, and the small sounds of living only emphasize the heavy transitional silence.

A warbler in a twisted cedar near the house spilled forth a burst of song that died on a sad, haunting note. And from a wind-warped sycamore standing alone in a distant field came a faint, final answer.

But the two middle-aged, startlingly-alike women who were striding about at one side of the house, with five or six nondescript cats, paid no attention to bird songs. The sisters — drably garbed, large boned, with their lank hair drawn tightly back from their gaunt faces — instead stalked grimly back and forth, each with a stick in her hand, peering intently at the ground.

Ellen Brewster was watching them from the narrow, dark kitchen of the house, where she was washing up the dishes. Ab-

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ruptly — just as she set the last soapy plate on the wooden drainboard and poured out the dishwater — one sister screamed hoarsely at a cat which had pounced on something in the grass. Then she forced the animal away with her stick and stooped to pick up a small object. The other sister hurried over eagerly to peer at it.

Ellen dumped a box of wormy oatmeal, which she wasn't going to cook no matter what *they* said, into the meager garbage and carried it outside, carefully keeping the toolshed between herself and her employers. As she scattered the garbage over the fence, the sisters' shrill voices came to her clearly. After listening a moment, she tiptoed into the shed, picked her way between the stacked boxes of trash and rubbed at the dust-grimed window at the front with the heel of her hand. Priscilla Colton was standing directly beneath the window, holding a dead sparrow.

There was the sound of an unseen car grinding noisily into the gravelled driveway. Startled, the sisters raised their heads and stared with undisguised hostility until a green sedan emerged into their view and drew up before the house.

"Oh, just Dr. Potter," Priscilla shrugged. The look of fascination returned to her face as she bent, once more, over the horrible thing in her hand, while her sister crowded close for a final look. Then, with a regretful sigh, Priscilla replaced the foul bit of carrion in the weeds, as gently as if it were some cherished pet. One of the cats darted forward, but she forestalled it with a vicious swipe of her stick that sent the animal caterwauling into the thick woods behind the house.

Shaking her head exasperatedly, Ellen left the shed and returned to the kitchen.

Dr. Potter stepped briskly out of his car and reached for his small black satchel. A chubby, white-haired man who retained the smooth pink cheeks, the guileless eyes and the unquenchably cheerful manner of a Boy Scout, Dr. Potter had been called in some years earlier by the Colton girls' father for what proved to be that old gentleman's final illness. And he'd continued to call once a week ever since, having transferred his administrations to the girls' mother. He'd treated the taciturn, now-bedridden old lady with an amazing variety of pills, medicines and bedside jovialities. But he either did not know, or at least never had disclosed, the name of the malady from which she'd so long been suffering.

"Good evening!" the doctor called breathlessly, approaching at an eager trot. "And how is your mother this evening?"

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"Poorly, Doctor, poorly." Priscilla, always the spokesman, gave her stock answer to the stock question. And both sisters, like dutiful children reluctantly leaving their play, moved slowly forward, with their cats tumbling about their legs.

By now, the fading light in the western sky had almost completely drained off beneath the horizon, and a bat flittering overhead was virtually invisible against the firs. Priscilla stepped onto the sagging porch and silently opened the front door. Dr. Potter moved past her with a "Thank you!" that sounded much too loud in the pitch-black, musty-smelling parlor.

In the distance, from across the flat farmlands that had once been marsh, a hound bayed, eerily, and the doctor waited almost nervously for one of the sisters to strike a light. But the girls had spun around in the doorway to stare back into the night.

"Hear that hound howl?" Priscilla asked, tensely. "Somebody," she whispered hoarsely, "is going to die!"

"Or *has* died!" Delight chimed in. "I wonder who? . . . Old man Harrigan? . . . Mrs. Feeley?" Her voice was tremulous and avid, as though she were tantalizing herself with exciting guesses.

"Nonsense, girls, nonsense. Pure superstition!" the doctor interjected, testily.

The hound bayed again, and the rising night wind brought the mournful keening suddenly closer.

Priscilla emitted an almost ecstatic sigh.

Dr. Potter cleared his throat. "May we have a light, please?" His tone implied, tactfully but firmly, that his professional time was extremely valuable.

There was a moment of delay, as if the sisters were hoping for the hound to again give voice. Then Priscilla made her way swiftly into the dark room, the doctor heard the scrape of a matchhead on sandpaper and saw the tiny flare of light and Priscilla reaching overhead to light a gas jet on the wall. The flame shot up — almost every other house in town long since had been converted to electricity — and cast a weird pattern of light and shadow over the cavernous room, with its ornate Victorian furniture, stained and peeling wallpaper and painstakingly darned lace curtains that had been hanging at the tall, narrow windows nearly twenty years. The doctor wondered once more why the Coltons, with all their money, had let the place go to ruin so. But Priscilla was moving toward the open double doors of the adjoining downstairs bedroom and Dr. Potter, following, hastily resumed his professional smile.

Priscilla lit a gas jet just inside

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the doorway. Its feeble light revealed a massive carved bedstead piled high with rumpled patchwork quilts and, at its head, sunk deep in a goosedown pillow, the face of Dr. Potter's elderly patient.

"Well, well," the doctor boomed cheerfully. "And how are you tonight, Mrs. Colton?"

There was no response from the bed — though usually the grim little old lady would open her beady eyes and scowl or mutter something unintelligible when thus aroused from her almost perpetual light naps.

Dr. Potter bent over the bed, jerked down the heavy quilts and placed his ear against his patient's wasted chest — at the same time picking up one of her bony, talon-like wrists. After a moment, he dropped her hand and quickly took his stethoscope from his little black bag, fitted the ear-plugs to his ears, and again bent over the old woman, applying the receiver cup to the region of her heart. After a minute he stood up, slowly, looking like an embarrassed small boy, about to cry.

"I'm sorry . . ." he said, in a sepulchral tone. "Your mother has passed away."

There was a stunned silence, as the girls looked unbelievingly from him to their mother. The dim light played grotesquely over the dead woman's deeply wrin-

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kled, sunken cheeks, and sagging, toothless jaws. And, as the lamp flame flickered, it was reflected now and again by that part of the dead woman's eyeballs not covered by the drooped eyelids — giving the odd effect that the old lady was still slyly watching them.

"Poor Ma," Priscilla said mechanically. "She was just as always when I gave her her medicine."

But the sisters did not burst into tears. They stared at their dead mother silently, and then back at the doctor, with a queer gleam in their eyes. Then they looked into each other's faces, tensely.

"When . . . How long ago?" Priscilla whispered, breathlessly.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Not long," he said. To avoid looking into her piercing eyes, he turned to put his stethoscope back into his satchel, then gently pulled the sheet up over the face on the pillow. "*Rigor mortis* hasn't yet set in. Probably within the last hour."

In the silence that followed, the three who stood in the room once more heard the distant mournful baying of the hound.

The sisters' eyes met again, swiftly.

"It was Ma!" Priscilla gasped. "It was Ma that hound meant, and we didn't guess!"

"Girls, you can, er, be comforted by the thought that your mother is spared further suffering," the doctor said, uneasily. "She passed away peacefully."

He picked up his satchel and took a step toward the door. The sisters certainly showed little signs of grief, but after all they'd been expecting the old lady to die for years. Bedridden and senile, she'd only been half alive, anyway. Aloud, he said, briskly, "I'd better hurry back to town and phone Bartz before he goes to bed, so he can come out and get the body tonight yet." He was edging past the sisters, but abruptly Priscilla blocked his way, her eyes flashing wildly and her whole body trembling.

"No! . . . No! . . . No!" she almost shrieked. "We don't want the undertaker! He can't take our mother away! No! She belongs to us! . . . We'll never let him in!"

"But . . . But . . ." the doctor sputtered. "Now, now, Priscilla . . . I realize bereavement is always a shock. But you're a sensible woman. You know you can't keep your mother here."

"But we're *going* to keep her here! Aren't we, Delight?"

"Priscilla, please be sensible!" The doctor took out a handkerchief and patted his perspiring forehead. "Your mother's body *must* be embalmed and buried. Aside from the health regulations, you know you wouldn't want to

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keep it here. Besides," he floundered, "your mother already has left you; that's merely her body . . ."

Priscilla glared at him with a look of almost insane hatred. But after a moment, she dropped her eyes and capitulated, meekly. "All right, Doctor, just as you say. Bartz may come tonight. But he can't take her away with him. He must do his work here, where we can watch him! She's ours!"

"But . . ." Dr. Potter was aghast at what she was demanding. "Why, you don't want to witness that . . . Why . . ."

Priscilla's eyes flashed. "Yes, we do! Don't we, Delight?" Delight nodded agreement, her own eyes alight with anticipation. "He won't get inside this house otherwise! You tell him."

The doctor looked uncertainly from one grimly determined face to the other, then helplessly inclined his head to indicate he was accepting this gruesome compromise. He mumbled, "Good night!", and almost fled through the gloomy parlor. He turned at the front door to call back, sternly, "But for heaven's sake, keep those blasted cats out of your mother's room!"

Then Dr. Potter hurried through the dew-wet grass, climbed in his car, and jammed his foot down on the starter.

Henry Bartz was thinking how he hated his work as he drove his lumbering hearse on the road to the Colton place. He'd always been ashamed of making money from other folks' sorrow. And then, too, there was his wife's attitude: The day he'd completed his mortician's course after failing in the furniture business, she'd informed him she'd go into screaming hysterics if any hands that had messed around with dead people's bodies ever touched her own soft, voluptuous one. And though, during the years since, she'd proved to be not quite a woman with an unbreakable will, life had been difficult.

Bartz was driving the hearse rather than his car because he still hoped he could persuade the Colton sisters to allow him to take the body to his funeral parlor to do the embalming. But he doubted he'd have much luck. His thoughts shifted to the peculiarities of the Colton sisters.

Priscilla had been a born old maid from childhood. But Delight, the younger one, had been a popular, fun-loving girl, and in those days the big old mansion had been filled with a constant stream of her friends and admirers. The Coltons had gone abroad several times, and Delight had become engaged to the younger son of a titled family. But then, just before the wedding, her domineering mother and sister, who'd

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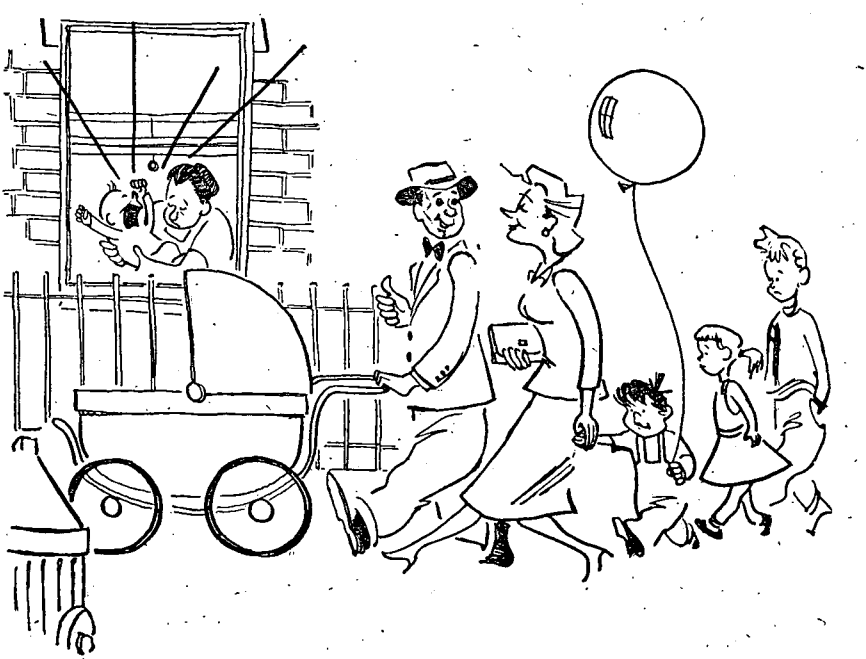
inexplicably opposed the match, had managed to break it up. Shortly thereafter, the young man had married an English girl — and Delight had changed overnight into a bitter carbon copy of her colorless older sister.

When old Jeremiah Colton had died, his wife and daughter had given him the most lavish funeral the town had ever known. And then they'd abruptly announced that there never would be another trip to Europe, that they would never again participate in the town's social life — and that they intended to have built, in the modest little hilltop cemetery, a $20,000 family mausoleum — a form of interment for the father so pretentious and foreign to the townspeople's concept of Christian burial that it was regarded as verging on the barbaric. And the Colton women had kept their word, for they never again had appeared in public except when they (infrequently) attended church, or a funeral (they never missed a funeral, whether or not they knew the deceased), or made their weekly pilgrimages to the big marble mausoleum to "visit" their father. And, though they



"Honey — they're playing our song."

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spent large sums on floral pieces, and on their dismal excursions dressed in elegant black silk, they never again spent a cent on their home, or in entertaining, or in providing themselves with any of the comforts and little luxuries they could so well have afforded.

After their mother became bedridden, the girls almost never left the house. And little was known of their way of life, except from the tales of the disgruntled, low-paid hired girls who came and went so rapidly — tales of the sisters' fantastic economies (the stale bread they bought because it was a couple of cents cheaper than the fresh, the grocers' crates they made the hired girls lug home to burn in the wood stove because they were free, the moldering furniture, the dangerous falling plaster, the unused upstairs bedrooms stacked halfway to the ceiling with boxes of trash, old newspapers and bottles); tales of the way the sisters allowed their numerous cats to run wild in the house; and, above all, of the sisters' morbid preoccupation with disease and death (their endless discussions of funerals and comparisons of one corpse with another, the medical and "doctor" books they avidly read, the little wakes they staged for the cats that died) . . . But though all of this was a frequent subject of gossip in the town, most people had a hard time believing it, for the highly-respected Coltons had been the town's leading family, and besides, on the rare occasions when the sisters *did* appear in public, they still made a fine, genteel appearance. . . .

But there was no doubt about it, the two old maids were certainly queer. Henry Bartz shook his head and stepped on the brake so abruptly that his man of all work who'd been snoring on the seat beside him was thrown forward against the dashboard. Old Jake swore softly, and Bartz turned between the big sagging gates and into the poplar-lined driveway. The hearse bounced over the ruts, creaking and groaning, and came to a stop before the monstrous old house — a shapeless black mass in the moonlight, with light gleaming feebly through only a single side window.

Bartz tossed away his mangled cigar butt, strode onto the porch and knocked on the screen door. An owl hidden overhead in the dark spruces hooted weirdly. Then Bartz jumped, startled, as a voice spoke from the darkness not more than three feet away.

"You can just turn that hearse around and drive it right back, Mr. Bartz! You won't be needing it," the voice said, furiously. "You're not taking our mother one step out of this house!"

Bartz now dimly made out the faces of the two sisters just inside

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the screen door — where they'd evidently been waiting in the darkness.

"We have Mother all ready for you," Priscilla continued, more calmly. "You may bring in your equipment and get to work. If you don't care to do that, we'll get the undertaker from Eastport!"

Well, after all, Bartz told himself, wearily, he'd expected this. He called to old Jake to carry his paraphernalia inside. And then he groped his way after the sisters through the unlit parlor to the bedroom doorway. There he received a shock.

The bedroom was lit only by half-a-dozen wax tapers, flickering in a row at the head of the bed. But instead of being entirely covered with a sheet, as the doctor had left it, the pathetically wasted, shrunken body of the little old lady was laid out nude on the bed.

"My sister and I have washed and prepared her for you," Priscilla said, efficiently. "Now just go ahead with your work and don't mind us. We'll sit here and watch."

And with that, she and Delight sat down in the two straight-back chairs which were lined up before the bed like first-row seats in a theater.

"But, Miss Colton!" Bartz gasped. "You can't really mean . . . You don't realize what you're saying. You don't understand what . . . Some of the things I have to do. . . ." For he was remembering his own reaction the first time he'd witnessed the ghoulish routine he had to go through. Such things as the insertion of the anal plug . . . the draining of blood from the body, and substitution of the preservative fluid . . . the puncturing of the abdomen to provide an escape for forming gas . . . the tacking down of the eye-lids, the sewing together of the lips. . . . He'd been violently sick to his stomach, even though he'd been a student, forewarned of what he was to see. . . . And this was their own mother!

"We know just what you have to do, don't we, Delight?" Priscilla said primly. Delight nodded agreement and pulled her chair forward a little. "We do not wish to leave our Mother alone. So begin, Mr. Bartz!" Priscilla ordered, with finality.

Bartz looked from one pair of hungrily staring eyes to the other, and then at the shriveled body on the bed, over which the wavering yellow candlelight was playing queer tricks. The owl out in the spruces hooted again, derisively. . . .

Just then Jake slouched through the doorway, loaded down with equipment. His jaw sagged and he almost dropped his armload when he saw the two sisters settled down expectantly beside the bed.

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Henry Bartz never forgot that job.

He was naturally not a talkative man. And like a doctor, he'd always considered it unethical to discuss his profession. But he couldn't refrain from telling his wife about the night's work at the Colton place — and how the sisters had hung over his shoulder through every step, so as not to miss a movement. And, of course, then it got all around town the next day.

And that was the principal reason the funeral was so well attended three days later. Plain curiosity. Because, actually, brusque old lady Colton had alienated all of her still-living friends years before.

The Rev. J. Carleton Jones, a massive, consciously handsome man with neatly waved iron-gray hair and a jaunty mustache, sat in his study pleasantly re-living his funeral sermon. He rather enjoyed funerals. For, at funerals, he orated with a pipe-organ tremulo and, pulling all stops, fairly wallowed in emotionalism until there wasn't a dry eye in sight. His oration today had been particularly masterful, even though — he frowned, slightly — it had failed to wring a single tear from the two principal, black-veiled mourners. And it had been a pity that the steady drizzle had prevented many from going to the cemetery service. But, still, there had been mountains of flowers (mostly provided by the bereaved daughters), and only once before in his life had he had the honor of consigning a departed parishioner to that magnificent mausoleum.

The Reverend frowned again, as a timid knock interrupted his musings. It was Ellen Brewster, the Coltons' hired girl, still in her black funeral attire.

"Reverend, I'm sorry to bother you. . . ." Ellen twisted her purse handle, nervously. "But I wonder if you'd know of a new place for me? You see, I've quit working for the Coltons."

"Oh, indeed, Ellen?" The Reverend nodded, sympathetically. "Yes, I'm sure we can easily find you another situation."

"Now that the Missus is dead," Ellen hesitated, "I felt they really didn't need me, and . . ." She burst into tears. ". . . . And, oh Reverend . . . I just couldn't *stand* it any more!"

Tom Blasky, some weeks later, lay stretched out on the broken-down cot he'd hauled into the cemetery caretaker's toolhouse, listening to the rain drumming on the tin roof. The rain had interrupted him in the digging of a grave. He lifted the already half-emptied pint of bootleg to his lips and, in a series of rapid, adams-apple-moving swallows, reduced it to a quarter pint. Then he recorked the bottle, wiped his

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mouth with the back of his dirt-seamed hand, and coughed explosively.

He'd been working at the cemetery over 20 years, digging graves and mowing grass. Working there had never bothered him — until recently. He'd seen the Colton sisters probably hundreds of times, beginning way back when they'd come to supervise the building of that big vault, more than ten years ago. Then they — and their mother, too, until she took to her bed — used to come out every week and put flowers on their father's casket.

Tom reached for the bottle again, uncorked it, and lifted it to his lips.

But the way they'd been since the old lady died — it wasn't good. No, it wasn't good. For nearly a month, now, they'd been coming every day, going inside the vault and staying sometimes hours. . . . And twice already, they'd made him do something terrible! And he didn't want to do it again. He'd had enough nightmares about it already. . . . But this storm ought to keep them home today, anyway. He was just drifting off to sleep when he heard somebody shouting his name: "Tom! Tom Blasky! Wake up!"

The Colton sisters were standing over him in glistening raincoats and hats.

"Mr. Blasky, will you get up, please!" Priscilla ordered. "We want you to come with us into the vault."

Tom stumbled to his feet. No, no, he told himself, he didn't want to do that again. He started to mumble protests, but Priscilla curtly cut him off, and he found himself following her through the doorway. As he slouched outside, after the sisters, the driving rain beat hard on his face. It was getting dark early, and the looming trees scattered over the burying ground were bending and swaying in the wind. And then a near-blinding, gigantic flash of lightning bared, all at once, with sudden ghostly and gleaming clarity, the hundreds of pale marble and granite tombstones. In the immediately following blackness, Tom, who was staggering blindly after the sisters, ran head-on into their seldom-used, 25-year-old Packard sedan, parked in front of the toolhouse.

In another blinding flash of lightning and deafening crash of thunder, they finally reached the massive, white-marble mausoleum. Priscilla unlocked the heavy bronze doors, and the sisters stepped quickly inside. Tom, though soaked to the skin, followed only very reluctantly. Priscilla lighted two large wax candles which stood, partially burned, in niches in the wall directly above the two coffins (and beside the two still-empty coffin ledges). De-

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light shut the bronze doors until they were only slightly ajar, and at once the wild storm outside was muted by the thick stone walls.

Tom stood as close to the doors as possible, swaying unsteadily. This is not good, not good, he told himself. They shouldn't make me do this. The sisters moved to the newer coffin.

"All right, Tom," Priscilla said, her eyes shining oddly in the flickering candlelight. "You know what to do. Take the lid off mother's casket, so we can examine her again."

Tom moved unenthusiastically forward, put his hands on the lid and then recoiled.

"Come, Tom!" Priscilla said, sharply, like a teacher reprimanding a recalcitrant child. "Hurry! Lift the lid."

With a groan, Tom moved forward again and set to work.

Though he'd intended to keep his eyes averted, they were drawn, as if by a magnet, to the dead woman's face — which, though sunken, in the moving shadows of the flickering candlelight seemed so alive that he felt a chill running down his back. Priscilla and Delight bent over the satin-lined casket. After a couple of minutes of silence, Priscilla cried out, in a queer voice:

"Look, something is seeping from under her arm!"

At that moment the wind shifted and a cold gust of wind and rain shot between the doors, blowing out the candles and leaving them in total darkness . . . a darkness suddenly heavy with a sickeningly sweet smell . . . the smell of death. . . . And in the blackness, Tom had the nightmare feeling that he had been hopelessly locked in the tomb with the two corpses, that he was in his own grave and slowly, horribly, suffocating to death.

As from a great distance, he heard Priscilla saying, calmly, "I have the matches." And a moment later she had re-lit the candles. "Shut the doors tight, Tom," she said, grimly.

Badly shaken, he did as she ordered.

The next day Tom Blasky went to the First National Bank and told its president, portly, white-haired John Winters, who was

"Look, Daddy — the first robin!"

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chairman of the board of directors of the cemetery association, that he was quitting his job. Winters questioned him as to the reason, and so the story of the Colton sisters' macabre practices came out. Winters immediately called in Dr. Potter and Henry Bartz, who also were directors of the cemetery board, and after some shaking of heads, they drafted a note to the Colton girls. The note merely said that the cemetery association, in order to comply with state and village health regulations, henceforth was compelled to prohibit the opening of any coffin after it had been interred or placed in a vault, except under court order.

And so Tom Blasky never saw the old maids again. Not alive, that is.

Ten days later, Jimmy Mason, a small boy who lived on the edge of town, raced home to his mother almost too excited to talk, after having daringly peered in a window of the old Colton mansion. Dr. Potter, who was also the county coroner, hurried out to the place with big Charlie Wheeler, the town marshal. They drove the starving cats out of the house, then cut the two sisters down. The girls had hanged themselves, side by side, from the stairway balustrade. They'd been dead, Dr. Potter estimated, three days.

The sisters had willed their entire estate to the cemetery association, for the enlargement and improvement of the grounds and the perpetual upkeep of all the graves in it. It took cleaning women nearly a month to sort and haul out the mountains of trash stored in the house.

In the bookcase containing the medical books, the cleaning women found three ledgers in which Priscilla had kept a running journal. These ledgers eventually made their way into the hands of Dr. Potter. He spent a week reading every word — then burned them in his fireplace.

Priscilla's journal had been an interminable thesis on death — a compilation of literately set-down facts gleaned from medical and undertaking textbooks, interlarded with the sisters' observations at funerals, their wild imaginings on the subject of death and dying, and the day-by-day gruesome details of their parents' last illnesses — becoming, toward the end, clearly the product of a demented mind. Priscilla's journal had concluded:

"Since the Cemetery Association has high-handedly barred us from further studies on the person of our dead mother, only one avenue of research remains open to us. Delight and I therefore choose to learn the ultimate facts of death — by personally experiencing it."

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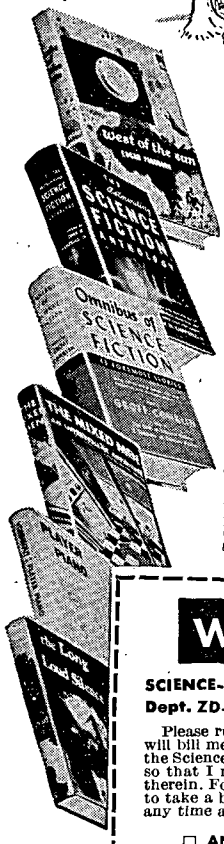

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